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MONTHLY REVIEW

VOL. 52 4

AN INDEPENDENT SOCIALIST MAGAZINE

Is Capitalism a Disease?

A report on the crisis in U.S. public health
by Richard Levins

Socialism: A Time to Retreat?

by the Editors

Books: John Bellamy Foster on *Marx and Nature* by Paul Burkett; Annette T. Rubinstein on *The View from Alger's Window* by Tony Hiss; Geoffrey Fox on *Mexico's Hope* by James Cockcroft

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MONTHLY REVIEW VOLUME 52 NUMBER 4 SEPTEMBER 2000

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NOTES FROM THE EDITORS

In the United States, the creation of wealth is often presented as a process that benefits everyone within the society. A common shibboleth, made famous during the Kennedy administration, is that "a rising tide lifts all boats." In June 2000, the Conference Board, an organization devoted to the promotion of global business and one of the leading private centers for the analysis of economic statistics, released a report actually entitled *Does a Rising Tide Lift All Boats?* The report concludes: "Unfortunately, the answer to date is 'no.'"

In examining the poverty rate among fulltime, year-round workers (workers who work at least thirty-five hours a week and at least fifty weeks a year), the Conference Board discovered that the share of such workers and their families that fell below the poverty line (currently set at 13,290 dollars a year for a family of three) has not decreased with the growth of wealth, but has remained fairly flat, even increasing slightly, since 1973. Further, despite the fact that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rose by more than 25 percent between 1986 and 1998, the poverty rate among fulltime, year-round workers—far from decreasing—*actually increased over the same period by 7.4 percent.* From 1997 to 1998—years of record profits for capital—the poverty rate among these workers jumped by almost half a percentage point. The last time that a one-year increase of this size was experienced was in 1981, a year of economic recession. Millions of children whose parents work fulltime nearly every week of the year are now living below the poverty line, and their numbers are growing both absolutely and relatively. According to the Conference Board, "This is not the outcome one would expect from the longest economic expansion in U.S. history."

But it is. There is nothing particularly surprising—except to those who believe the ideology of the system itself—about the fact that capitalism produces poverty along with wealth, hunger for many along with opulence for very few. The fact

(continued on inside back cover)

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Socialism: A Time to Retreat?

by the Editors

Some wags claim that it is the conservatives who fear socialism, while the radicals believe that capitalism will last forever. Conservatives, they say, fear widespread popular discontent, while radicals abandon hope of a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. An exaggeration? Of course. Even so, this witticism is not inappropriate. Many on the left have indeed retreated from class and a vision of a democratic, egalitarian socialism. The important social issues of our day—race, gender, and the environment—more often than not are divorced from the role of class structure. The rule of the capitalist class and the class struggle are shoved to the back burner. Whether consciously or not, the implicit assumption underlying the retreat from class is that capitalism will somehow or other go on and on as it creates miraculous new technology. Best then to stick to making those adjustments in social conditions that the system will presumably allow.

This retreat from class is often reinforced by the categorical dismissal of the possibility of socialism. The evidence for this comes from a superficial and ahistorical examination of the kind of socialism that emerged in the Soviet bloc. Thus, the contradictions of "socialism from above" and the emergence of privileged sectors of society disappear from view. Ignored are the wide differences among the people, between elite and masses, between town and country, and between less developed and advantaged regions. Also not taken into account is the interest of the ruling elite in new property relations as a way of ensuring their and their children's privileged positions. Instead of observing the tensions arising from conflicting interests, a leading ten-

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dency among radicals is to zero in on the presumably inevitable failure of central planning as the essential cause of the collapse.

There is, of course, no uniformity in this widespread retreat from a focus on class struggle.* We do not wish to tar all of those who are a part of this retreat with the same brush. In fact, it is not our intention to tar any leftwingers at all. Furthermore, we reject the practice of questioning the motives of those we may disagree with. Nevertheless, the widening gap on the left needs to be confronted. On that score, two recent publications offer useful insight into the disparity between those who blow the trumpet of retreat and those who dig in their heels and call for unending struggle to overcome the misery and insecurity of billions of people on this planet. On one hand is the editorial by Perry Anderson in the January-February 2000 issue of *New Left Review*, which announces a new stance for the journal. On the other hand, a totally contrary analysis and message permeates Daniel Singer's latest book, *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999).

Perry Anderson's editorial in the first issue of *New Left Review* for the new century, entitled "Renewals," announces that it is time for an overhaul. "With this issue," he declares, "we start a new series of the journal marked by a break of numerals, in keeping with radical tradition, and a redesign of its appearance, in token of changes to come." What then is new beyond renumbering and design? The answer is largely contained in the following extract:

> The only starting-point for a realistic Left today is a lucid registration of historical defeat. Capital has comprehensively beaten back all threats to its rule. . . . For the Left, the lesson of the past century is one taught by Marx. Its first task is to attend to the actual development of capitalism as a complex machinery of production and profit, in constant motion. . . . No collective agency able to match the power of capital is yet on the horizon. We are in a time, as genetic engineering looms, when the only revolutionary force at present capable of disturbing its equilibrium appears to be scientific progress itself—the forces of production, so unpopular with Marxists convinced of the primacy of relations of production when a socialist movement was still alive.

*For a discussion of some of the many forms that this has taken, we heartily recommend Ellen Meiksins Wood's book, winner of the Issac Deustcher prize, *The Retreat from Class* (New York: Verso, 1986).

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> But if the human energies for a change of system are ever released again, it will be from within the metabolism of capitalism itself. We cannot turn away from it. Only in the evolution of this order could lie the secrets of another one (16-17).

Does Marx teach that the first task for the left "is to attend to the actual development of capitalism?" The Marx we know was first and foremost a social revolutionary. He remained one throughout the vicissitudes of social change, during the advance and retreat of social struggles. Neither the defeat of the 1848 revolutions, the end of the Communist League, nor the destruction of the Paris Commune were occasions for him to forsake revolutionary struggle. Marx and Engels were not summer soldiers. Theirs was the long view. Defeats had to be studied and analyzed to prepare a path for renewed struggle. Moreover, Marx's intensive study of the "actual development of capitalism" was not a departure from struggle, but viewed as a contribution to the working-class struggle for power to transform society. The first volume of *Capital* was often referred to in the nineteenth century as the workers' bible.

As a justification for downplaying class relations, Anderson claims that scientific progress is the *only* revolutionary force at present (and presumably in the future as well) capable of disturbing the equilibrium of capitalism. Scientific progress is viewed as neutral, not as a force directed in large measure by the profit motive as well as a byproduct of the military's search for more effective military operations.

The old-fashioned Marxists were supposedly wrong in being convinced—"when a socialist movement was still alive"—of the "primacy of social relations." Now that the movement is no longer alive, we are led to believe, there is no longer any reason to disguise the fact that productive forces are what really count. But does this mean that Marxists should ignore or give up harping on production relations until (or if and when) a vigorous socialist movement arises as a result of new technological developments? How, then, will a revived socialist movement emerge if the left sits on its behind waiting for it to develop at some future date?

One would never know from this reassessment that there are

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vital labor movements in a number of countries as well as other new developments that show promise. Note, for example, the following account by Leo Panitch in an essay he prepared for the *Socialist Register 2001,* entitled *Working Classes, Global Realities* (Merlin Press and Monthly Review Press, forthcoming in November 2000):

> That this may be an opportune moment to address new strategies for labour is suggested not only by the strikes in so many countries in recent years (as this volume was finalized, in May/June 2000, there were general strikes in Argentina, India, Korea, Nigeria and South Africa); or by recent surveys that show rising class awareness even in the USA where working class self identification has historically been very low.* What is much more important than these instances of conflict and consciousness is the fact that *labour is changing in ways that make it a more inclusive social agent.* The main developments here have been women's massive (re)entry into the labour force and changing patterns of migration, both of which have recomposed the working classes of many countries and made them into very different classes in both objective and subjective terms than they were even a quarter century or so ago. Working classes have, of course, always been made up of many diverse elements: what is significant is the way the old labour movements are being changed by the recomposition of the working classes in our time.

It would be unfair to claim that Anderson is not concerned with the conditions and activity of the working class. Nor is there reason to think that he has given up on a socialist ideal in the abstract. But according to his lights, since there is no socialist movement presently active, all we can and should do is wait and hope for capitalism to create the conditions for change: "if the human energies are ever released again, it will be from the metabolism of capitalism itself." It is the changes in capitalism and its scientific wonders that will produce the potential forces for social transformation. But what of the continuously growing inequality between the industrialized and former colonial world,

*Panitch: "For instance, a *New York Times* poll in 1996 found that 55% of Americans defined themselves as working class while only 36% defined themselves as middle class; while Gallup found that the number of people who thought 'there is a class struggle' in Britain rose from around 60% in the early 1960s to 81% in the mid-1990s. Colin Leys and I earlier discussed these indications of growing class awareness in our essay, 'The Legacy of the Manifesto,' *Socialist Register 1998.*"

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and indeed the widening of the income gaps within the leading capitalist countries? Do the billions of people on this planet who live in misery, hunger, untreated diseases, and unnecessary early deaths have to wait for the metabolism of capitalism itself? Passing from one technological revolution to another, capitalism has in the past metabolized many times. But while these revolutions have added to well-being and a pleasanter life for at most 25 or 30 percent of the world's population, there has been no let-up in the ever-growing polarization between the many and the few. Is there a sound reason, other than idle speculation, to anticipate that today's electronic miracles will transform the basic laws of motion of capitalism?

A Wholly Different View

The very title of Daniel Singer's latest book telegraphs a contrary analysis and outlook. *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?* is infused with a refutation of the assumption, in fact outright conviction, by some sectors of the left and the pretend-left that there is no alternative (TINA) to capitalism. Singer's outlook is imbued with the view that capitalism is not destined to live forever. Nor is the answer to the end of capitalism and the nature of the aftermath to be found on the sidelines while waiting for capitalism to metabolize. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves. . . ."

It is not our intention to weigh the two examples against each other in all their aspects. One is an editorial that describes the new perspective for its journal on an array of subjects in addition to the paragraph discussed above. Singer's book, on the other hand, is a full-dress review of the current state of the world economy, the fallout from the Russian Revolution, the failure of social democracy, and other major events. We turn to it on this occasion because of the contrast with Anderson in the attention it pays to the enormous contingency of history and the possibility, even necessity, of developing an alternative course. As Singer states in his introduction:

> Above all, this is not an essay announcing the impending collapse of capitalism and the advent of a socialist millennium. Too many great expectations have been shattered to revive such

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> exercises. But the certainty of victory is not indispensable for action. Its possibility is a sufficient spur. *Whose Millennium?* is fundamentally a gesture of revolt against TINA, a refusal of the prevailing religion of resignation and of its natural ally, irresponsibility. We are not tied to the system, and nothing can prevent us from looking beyond the capitalist horizon. We cannot just wash our hands and pretend. We are not doomed to impotence and inaction by fate (8).

Singer's call for unending struggle is not based on the illusion that it will be other than a long and difficult one, full of twists and turns. To be effective, we need to learn what went wrong in the past and to maintain a vision of the future that is both realistic and utopian. He does not promise or foretell a bright future, but proposes an outlook that should guide a revitalized and militant socialist movement. But if we are not going to be tied to the system, what alternatives should we work for? On that score, Singer puts forward a long-neglected and downplayed left theme in his chapter, "A Society of Equals." His handling of this issue goes far beyond the usual views such as equality of opportunity or even equality of income. "Our aim," he writes "is to create the material and social conditions that not only give meaning to people's work, but which enable them, by the same token, to seek the fulfillment of their desires and their dreams. There is only one thing that we want to eliminate: social injustice, the possibility of oppression or domination based on class, race, or gender. This we want to do thoroughly: not to diminish, reduce or alleviate oppression, but to uproot it in the literal sense of the term." (222-223)

There is much more to Singer's search for an alternative. This is not the place to delve into every component of his outlook. We do, however, need to lay further stress on the fact that Singer does not dwell in fantasy. His idealism is intertwined with a realistic sense of the enormity of the goals, the pitfalls, the length of the historical period required to achieve socialist transformation, even after an overturn of capitalism. What happens in the long, postrevolutionary transition, he emphasizes, will greatly affect how the ultimate goals turn out. There is no simplistic faith here in the inevitability of socialism:

> If we want to recover the dialectical link between the movement

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> and its objective, we must draw clear distinctions between actuality, necessity, and inevitability. Socialism may be a historical *possibility,* or even *necessary* to eliminate the evils of capitalism, but this does not mean that it will *inevitably* take its place. This departure from the fatalistic conception is, in a sense, a return to the more distant past, when socialism was not considered as bound to happen, since there was always the possibility, to quote the terms of Rosa Luxemburg, that barbarism would win out. Above all, uncertainty as to the ultimate result should not imply passivity, obedience, or resignation. On the contrary, it dictates greater participation, more activity, and more militancy since, within limits of objective conditions, the future will be what we shall make it. And this renewed conviction and activism would be particularly welcome today, because the power of the ruling class and the arrogance of its ideologues is largely due to our weakness, to our surrender, to our acceptance of the established rules of the game (272-273).

It should go without saying where we stand. *MR* was founded to spread the word on socialism and the struggle to attain it. We find it hard to understand how people who hate social injustice in this country and elsewhere on the planet can be uninvolved in one way or another with the pursuit of socialism. That is not to deny that we have learned a great deal along the way. These lessons, however, have not altered the basic thrust of *MR.* Despite mistakes, setbacks, and recognition that the road is long and arduous, we must not waver as we continue to study, educate, and be missionaries for the transcendence of the social system of capitalism and the development eventually in its place of a society of equals.

I know I can be accused of sacrilege in writing about political economy in the style of a novel about love or pirates. But I confess I get a pain from reading valuable works by certain sociologists, political experts, economists, and historians who write in code. Hermetic language isn't the invariable and inevitable price of profundity. In some cases it can simply conceal incapacity for communication raised to the category of intellectual virtue. I suspect that boredom can thus often serve to sanctify the established order, confirming that knowledge is a privilege of the elite.

—Eduardo Galeano

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Is Capitalism a Disease? The Crisis in U.S. Public Health

by Richard Levins

Readers will note that this article is nearly twice the length of the normal MR *piece, but because of the importance of the subject we are publishing it in its entirety. The text is based on a talk given by the author at the Brecht Forum in New York. —Eds.*

The scientific tradition of the "West," of Europe and North America, has had its greatest success when it has dealt with what we have come to think of as the central questions of scientific inquiry: "What is this made of?" and "How does this work?" Over the centuries, we have developed more and more sophisticated ways of answering these questions. We can cut things open, slice them thin, stain them, and answer what they are made of. We have made great achievements in these relatively simple areas, but have had dramatic failures in attempts to deal with more complex systems. We see this especially when we ask questions about health. When we look at the changing patterns of health over the last century or so, we have both cause for celebration and for dismay. Human life expectancy has increased by perhaps thirty years since the beginning of the twentieth century and the incidence of some of the classical deadly diseases has declined and almost disappeared. Smallpox presumably has been eradicated; leprosy is very rare; and polio has nearly vanished from most regions of the world. Scientific technologies have advanced to the point where we can give very sophisticated diagnoses, distinguishing between kinds of germs that are very similar to each other.

But the growing gap between rich and poor make many technical advances irrelevant to most of the world's people. Public health authorities were caught by surprise by the emergence of

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new diseases and the reappearance of diseases believed to be eradicated. In the 1970s, it was common to hear that infectious disease as an area of research was dying. In principle, infection had been licked; the health problems of the future would be degenerative diseases, problems of aging and chronic diseases. We now know this was a monumental error. The public health establishment was caught short by the return of malaria, cholera, tuberculosis, dengue, and other classical diseases. But it was also surprised by the appearance of apparently new infectious diseases: the most threatening of which is AIDS, but also Legionnaire's disease, Ebola virus, toxic shock syndrome, multiple drug resistant tuberculosi, and many others. Not only was infectious disease not on the way out, but old diseases have come back with increased virulence and totally new ones have emerged.

How did this happen; why was public health caught by surprise? Why did the health professions assume that infectious disease would disappear and why were they so wrong? In fact, infectious disease had been declining dramatically in Europe and North America for the last 150 years. One of the simplest kinds of predictions is that things will continue the way they have been going. Health professionals argued that infectious disease would disappear because we were inventing all kinds of new technologies for coping with them. We now can carry out diagnoses so rapidly that some diseases that might kill a person in two days can be identified in the laboratory soon enough to permit treatment. Instead of spending weeks culturing bacteria, we can use DNA to distinguish between pathogens that may have very similar symptoms. More importantly, we had developed a new arsenal of antimicrobial weapons, drugs, and vaccines, as well as pesticides to get rid of mosquitoes and ticks that are disease carriers. We came to understand that, through mutation and natural selection, micro-organisms can present a recurring threat. We assumed that whatever the microbial changes, the disease-causing mechanism would remain the same while we developed ever-newer weapons against it. It was, we believed, a war between us and the microbes, in which we would have the upper hand because our weapons were growing stronger and

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ever more effective. Another cause for optimism—at least this was the argument put forth by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund—was that economic development would eliminate poverty and produce affluence, making all the new technologies universally available. Finally, the demographers noted that while most infectious diseases are most deadly to children, we have an aging population, so the proportion of people likely to catch such illnesses will be smaller. One thing missing from this hypothesis was that one reason children are so vulnerable is that they have not developed the immunities that go along with exposure; older people have reduced susceptibility precisely because they have been exposed. But if there are fewer children, older people will have a lower level of immunity and will contract diseases at an older age. Indeed, some diseases, like mumps, are more serious in adults than they are in children.

So what was wrong with our epidemiological assumptions? We need to recognize that the historical mindset in medicine and related sciences was dangerously—and ideologically—limited. Nearly all who engaged in public health prediction took too narrow a view, both geograpically and temporally. Typically, they looked only at a century or two instead of the whole sweep of human history. Had they looked at a wider time-frame, they would have recognized that diseases come and go when there are major changes in social relations, population, the kinds of food we eat, and land use. When we change our relations with nature, we also change epidemiology and the opportunities for infection.

The Plague in Europe

Plague erupted in Europe for the first time in the sixth century during the decline of the Roman Empire under Justinian. Europe suffered from social disruption and declining production. The sanitary facilities of the great ancient cities were crumbling; under those circumstances, when plague was introduced it swept through the population with devastating effects. Plague reappeared in the fourteenth century during a developing crisis of feudalism, causing a population decline even before plague became widespread. The standard history of this plague occur-

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rence is that sailors landing in ports along the Black Sea brought plague with them from Asia in 1338; it then spread westward and, in a short time, reached Rome, Paris, and London. In other words, plague spread because it had been introduced from elsewhere. But it seems more likely that plague had entered Europe many times before but really didn't take off. It only became successful when the population became more vulnerable, when the human ecosystem could not confront a disease spread by rats at a time when the social infrastructure that would have controlled rats had crumbled.

An Ecological Proposal

When we at look at other diseases, we see that they rose and fell with historical change and circumstance. So, instead of a doctrine of the epidemiological transition, which held that infectious disease would simply disappear as countries developed, we need to substitute an ecological proposal: that with any major change in the way of life of a population (such as population density, patterns of residence, means of production), there will also be a change in our relations with pathogens, their reservoirs, and with the vectors of diseases. The new hemorrhagic fevers appearing in South America, Africa, and elsewhere almost all seem to be related to increased contact with rodents that humans don't normally meet, caused by the clearing of land for the production of grain in particular. Grain is also rodent food; rodents survive by eating seeds and grasses. When a forest is cleared and grain is planted, we also eliminate the coyotes, jaguars, snakes, and owls that eat rodents. The net result is an increase in rodent food and a reduction in rodent mortality. The rodent population grows. Now these disease-deliverers are social animals. They nest and build communities; when a new generation emerges, the young adults go out looking for homes elsewhere—often wandering into warehouses and people's homes, facilitating the transmission of diseases.

Another human activity, irrigation, is especially related to the breeding of snails, who transmit liver fluke disease, and mosquitoes, who spread malaria, dengue, and yellow fever. When irriga-

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tion proliferates, as it did, for example, after the construction of Egypt's Aswan Dam, habitats for mosquitoes were created. Rift Valley fever, which had occasionally erupted in Egypt, can now be found fulltime. The development of giant cities in the third world has created new environments for the spread of dengue, transmitted by the same mosquito that transmits yellow fever (*Aedes aegypti*). It has adapted to life around the edges of cities. A poor competitor against other varieties of mosquito in the forest, these mosquitoes are able to breed in abandoned lots, in puddles, water barrels, and old tires—in the special environment that we create in the giant cities in the tropics. Dengue and yellow fever are particularly threatening because of the growth of urbanization in the tropics with megacities like Bangkok, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, and others with populations of ten to twenty million. As human population grows, there are new opportunities for diseases. For instance, you need a few hundred thousand in a population before it can sustain measles. If there are fewer, measles can infect the entire population; those who survive will be resistant. But if there aren't enough new babies to maintain the disease, it will disappear and have to be reintroduced. But in a population of a quarter million people, there will be enough new babies who are not resistant that the disease can sustain itself in the population. Consider this: if we know there are diseases that require a quarter million people to be self-sustaining, what diseases will emerge in crowded populations of ten or twenty million? Clearly, as life conditions change so do opportunities for disease.

Yet another kind of myopic thinking in the public health community arose from the fact that doctors are concerned with human diseases but have not paid much attention to diseases of wildlife or of domestic animals or plants. Had they done this, they would have had to confront the reality that all organisms carry diseases. Diseases come from the invasion of an organism by a parasite. When an infection takes place, it may or may not produce symptoms. But all organisms deal with parasites and, from the point of view of the parasite, invading an organism is a way of escaping from competition in the water or in the soil. For

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instance, the bacteria that causes Legionnaire's Disease lives in water. It is found all over the world but is never very common because it is a poor competitor. It has very finicky dietary requirements, so normally humans don't encounter it. However, it has two things going for it. It can tolerate high temperatures and is resistant to chlorine. It withstands chlorine by hiding out inside an amoeba. In a convention center, hotel, or truck stop, water is both heated and chlorinated. And if it's a good hotel, we may find a showerhead that gives a fine spray of tiny droplets, perfect for carrying the bacteria into the furthest corners of your lungs. What we've done is to create the ideal environment for Legionnaire's Disease. The chlorine and the high temperature kill their competitors, the remains of which form a coating on the inside of the pipes that is marvelously rich in the food that the Legionnaire's bacterium loves.

If we look at other organisms, we see a constant jockeying for position between parasites and hosts. The more common a species is, the more attractive it is to new invasions by parasites. Humans are very common, and thus offer wonderful opportunities for invasion. When we observe disease patterns, we see that cholera, for example, spread from the Eastern Hemisphere into the Americas, entering Peru and then traveling up to Central America. But a similar route was followed by a disease of orange trees, by viruses of beans and tomatoes, as well as by wildlife diseases. What we see, then, is a constant coevolution between pathogens and hosts across all animal and plant life rather than a situation unique to humans. Surely, we would have a much better understanding of potential dangers if we understood human illness from this perspective.

Transmission of Diseases

What kinds of insects spread viruses to people? Nearly all of them are mosquitoes or flies, or belong to a second group which includes ticks, fleas, and lice. These are the two main groups that overwhelmingly spread human virus diseases, even though there are hundreds of thousands of other kinds of insects. There are very few diseases spread by beetles, none that I know of by

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butterflies or dragonflies. Why? Are there circumstances under which they might become transmitters of diseases? Among plants, the major distributors of plant viruses belong to a totally different group of insects—to aphids. However, both groups have similar mouths and subsist by sucking liquid from their hosts: the mosquito sucking blood, the aphid sucking sap. If you have ever sucked something through a straw, you know that after a while a vacuum builds up and in order to be able to continue slurping the liquid, you have to be able to return liquid. Similarly, the salivary glands of mosquitoes and of aphids return liquid to their hosts when they take up the blood or the sap, and in that liquid you find the viruses. That's why when we study viruses, we look at the salivary glands of mosquitoes, or of ticks, or anything else. We can begin to encounter these generalizations when we step back from looking at the particular details of a given disease and try to get a broad picture. But this wasn't done.

The Failure to Study Evolution and Society

Another kind of scientific narrowness—really a self-imposed intellectual constriction—is the failure to study evolution. Evolution tells us immediately that organisms respond to the challenges of their environment. If the challenge is, for example, an antibiotic, organisms will respond by adapting to those antibiotics. In agriculture, we know of hundreds of cases of insects that have become pesticide-resistant; in medicine, increasing numbers of micro-organisms have become resistant to antibiotics meant to fight them. Some microbes have become resistant to antibiotics even before they are used! This happens when an antibiotic is released on the market with a new trade name, but in fact is hardly different from its predecessor. It may look different, but if it acts on the bacteria in the same way, it will be met by the same defenses. It is not enough to look at the agent of disease; we have to look at what makes populations vulnerable. Conventional public health failed to look at world history, to look at other species, to look at evolution and ecology, and, finally, to look at social science. There is a growing body of literature that says that the poor and oppressed are more vulnerable to nearly

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all health hazards. But we still don't recognize class differences in the United States. Researchers discuss differences in income or a mother's education level or even socioeconomic status. But U.S. epidemiology does not deal with class, even when class is the best predictor of life expectancy, of old-age disability, or the frequency of heart attacks. As a predictor of coronary disease, it is better to measure class position than to measure cholesterol.

Other Explanations

Why do we wear these intellectual blinders that have so hobbled the study and practice of public health in this country? First, there are a multiplicity of long-term intellectual biases. Take, for example, American pragmatism. Americans pride themselves on their practicality. "Theory" is almost a dirty word. When we are overwhelmed with the urgency of a population that is sick, of kids that are dying, it becomes a luxury to ask about evolution. This overwhelming sense of urgency is one of the reasons why doctors don't look at diseases of tomatoes, don't ask about competition between different kinds of mosquitoes, and certainly don't look at historical factors. There is an inevitable tunnel vision built into the urgency of carrying out applied clinical or epidemiological work.

A second reason is the western scientific tradition of reductionism, which says that the way to understand a problem is to reduce it to its smallest elements and change things one at a time. This is very successful when the question is, "what is this made of?" Then we can isolate it, cut it out of an organism, put it in the blender or under the microscope. In fact, we have been marvelously successful at identifying what things are made of. That is why we have had a growing, if irrational, sophistication about small phenomena and events throughout the whole of scientific enterprise. Why is it we are so successful at giving individual emergency treatment and so ineffectual in stopping or preventing malaria, in anticipating its return, or dealing broadly with the health of whole populations? We are marvelously successful at breeding a wheat plant that can better use nitrogen to produce more grain but much less successful at alleviating hunger in the countryside.

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Four Hypotheses

So the typical failure has been a refusal to look at complexity. The successes have been successes of the small, where we could focus on isolated elements. In the United States, even though we spend more than any other country on healthcare, we have among the worst results among the industrial countries; certainly we are behind the Europeans and, in many ways, also behind Japan when the usual indicators of health are considered. This is something that worries public health people; why, they ask, do we spend so much and have so little to show for it compared to other countries?

Here are four hypotheses:

One, we don't actually get more healthcare; we just spend more for it. We know that something like 20 percent of our healthcare bill is in administration, that is, the cost of billing and the like. The rate of profit of the pharmaceutical industry is greater than that of capitalism as a whole, and much of that is in the United States. Doctors' salaries are huge, as are charges for hospital rooms. The consequence is that "investment" per patient is enormous.

Two, even when we do get more healthcare, it is not always good healthcare. Now, this seems paradoxical because we have more MRIs and more CT scans and more dialysis machines than most other countries. So why is our health not better? Medical decisions are not always made for medical reasons. There are a lot of incentives for making decisions as to which kind of techniques to use, what kinds of interventions—when to carry out heart surgery, for example—which give rise to differences in medical procedure among countries. We do a lot more implanting of pacemakers than Europe and perform more cesarean sections and hysterectomies. A hospital buys an expensive machine to attract both doctors and patients. But once on hand, it has to be used. You can't allow an MRI machine to sit idle in the hospital, so doctors are encouraged to use it if only to amortize the institution's investment. Another is that in order to keep the "batting average" of a surgeon high, he or she has to perform enough operations (several hundred a year) to keep skill levels

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up. An isolated hospital with only one heart transplant every three or four months is not a safe place to go. The wise patient will seek out a hospital with a highly regarded cardiac service equipped with the latest technology. But to win that prestige, skills must be maintained, so there's an incentive to keep both surgeons and machines working. Since the service is also an expensive thing to have, it needs to be kept busy if only to bring in surgical fees. But does it make sense have all that expensive equipment? Hospital administrators will tell you it does because the hospital down the road has it. If Mass General is in competition with Beth Israel, and both compete with Mount Sinai, all of them need the most advanced machines. Then there are the HMOs, which have their accountants making medical decisions, effectively rationing healthcare. Both approaches are meant to maximize profit. What happens is that sometimes people get too much care, sometimes too little. But in both cases, our health is a side effect of the obsession with making money. The irrationality of the system extends even to the rich, who are overtreated. We kill nearly two hundred thousand people a year through improper medical interventions. Many more die due to misuse of heavily advertised prescription medications, over-the-counter remedies, and other preparations.

The third hypothesis requires no elaboration for *Monthly Review* readers: the healthcare system is built on a foundation of inequality. Only some of us actually receive or have access to the healthcare we need, while most don't.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis: we have created a sick society, even as we invest more and more to repair the damage. We are exposed to more pollution and increasing levels of stress and therefore exposed, ironically, to more opportunities to display our cardiac surgery skills. We make more people miserable, so we spend more on psychiatry and on psychotropic drugs. This is clearly evident in the public health situation in contemporary Russia, where the collapse of universal health coverage exposed the population to all the ills of incipient capitalism. They have had waves of epidemics, diphtheria, whooping cough, and the completely novel situation in modern times of declining life

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expectancy—from about sixty-four years to about fifty-nine years. Ours is a sick society that demands ever greater expenditure to repair the damage to public health that it has itself inflicted.

Responses to the Crisis

The condition of healthcare has not gone unnoticed; in fact, there is widespread and growing dissatisfaction. And there have been a number of responses to address the situation:

Ecosystem Health: Ecologists looking at the problem have derived an approach they call Ecosystem Health. They posit that there are ecosystems under stress for multiple causes: from pollutants, contaminated food and water, high stress, and changes in the daily rhythm of life. For example, with nearly universal electrical light, people sleep less and our physiology changes. If we examine human biology as a socialized biology, we notice that there are things that appear as constants of human biology that really are not. For instance, it has long been conventional wisdom that, as a natural part of the aging process, blood pressure increases with age. But it turns out that among the !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari, blood pressure increases with age only up through puberty and then levels off. Our blood pressure pattern is a function of the kind of society in which we live. We can see this in the pattern of stress reaction hormones which vary with one's social location. Recent Harvard studies have shown that among groups of teenagers from high school, all of whom are doing equally well academically, working-class kids showed prolonged rises in cortisol under any kind of stress while upper-class kids showed a quick spike and then decline. The physiology of working-class youngsters was altered by their social location, whether or not they acknowledged their working status. Evidently one's body knows one's class position no matter how well one has been taught to deny it. Human physiology, then, is a socialized physiology and differing social locations create different relationships with the environment. This knowledge has led to the ecosystem health concept, bringing together environmentalists and public health people to examine questions about how we rate the health of the whole ecosystem.

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The Environmental Justice Movement: This movement arose from the observation—by others—that the best way to find an incinerator or a toxic waste dump is to look for an African-American neighborhood. With lower real-estate values in minority neighborhoods, it is cheaper to put the incinerator there. Zoning rules, made by the powerful, are more lax there. So the health risks from pollution and industrial waste become yet another facet of oppression. Exposure to pollutants doesn't affect everybody equally. Exposure to occupational health hazards—the exposure of somebody who makes a living sandblasting buildings, for example—is very different from someone who works at a desk totaling up actuarial tables. Exposure to environmental insult also varies with class and the condition of oppression. The environmental justice movement has been a response to this, fighting the dumping of pollutants and attempting to equalize the risks of an industrial society.

Social Determination of Health: This approach has been growing among epidemiologists, partly due to the rediscovery of what Rudolph Wirchow and Frederick Engels pointed out in the nineteenth century: that capitalism itself can undermine health. This is important to keep in mind when conservative and reactionary commentators assert that there isn't any real poverty anymore. They argue that while some people make more money than others and can afford a bigger color television, the poor are not without their TVs. The car of a poor family is a little bit older or perhaps they do not eat in restaurants as often, but this inequality does not negate the real truth as the right-wing pundits see it: basically, there is no longer any poverty. Of course, an answer is easily found in the numerous studies that show that, in fact, black people pay for racist oppression with life spans ten years shorter than that of whites. Poor and oppressed minorities have 25 percent fewer successful encounters with the healthcare system than more privileged groups. Meanwhile, the rate of death or other harmful outcomes increases with the level of poverty in illnesses like coronary heart disease, cancer of all forms, obesity, growth retardation in children, unplanned pregnancies, and maternal mortality.

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Those interested in the social determination of health include some English scholars, such as Richard Wilkinson, who has looked at the life expectancies of different ranks in the English civil service. He found there was a difference even among those groups that are better off than those exposed to obvious dire need. He noticed that mere social hierarchy, social differentiation, makes your health worse everywhere, not only among those in extreme poverty. Now this can be interpreted in two opposing ways, but both of them are operative. One is to say that inequality *per se*, rather than the level of poverty, can make a person sick. Another is to say, quite literally, that it is all in your head. In support of the latter, baboon studies are cited that seem to indicate that those with higher rank in their troupe have better health. Their arteries are cleaner, they respond to stress like upper-class people; their cortisol level shoots up under stress and then comes right down again. Lower-ranking baboons tend to have the effects of stress lasting longer; their life expectancies are lower. But if you intervene in animal communities and alter their social hierarchy, within a few months the baboon's physiology will take on the characteristics of its new social location. This leads some people to say that it is how people perceive their situation in society— and therefore that people must be taught to cope with where they are, that after all we create our own realities. That's a common phrase in some of the growth and therapy movements: we create our own realities. It's not so much that you're underpaid and poor, but that you feel lousy about it. And so we have devised cheer-up pills: the cure for depression is not to get rid of the depressing situation, but to help people feel better about it. Another way to look at this so-called social determination of health is to see it not as a simple result of inadequate incomes that need to be raised, but as a consequence of a profoundly stratified, class-based society. Those who emphasize the latter feel that it is a more radical position than simply talking about how absolute deprivation is bad for your health, because the remedy for that would seem to be to increase income. Instead, they say, you have to eliminate the inequalities of class. Since the same studies can give rise to opposite conclu-

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sions, we need to emphasize that inequality affects your health in many different ways. When rich people think about poverty, they think about it only in the sense of having a little bit less, without examining the underlying structure of impoverishment. Poverty affects people, first of all, as chronic deprivation, actually having less food or worse food. Kids who live in damp, moldy apartments have worse health than kids who live in dry apartments. There are many other ways in which chronic deprivation itself is a menace to health.

There are what we call low-frequency, high-intensity threats, meaning those experiences that do not happen to everybody, but that could, and therefore are a constant threat to a sense of well being. Robert Fogel, a right-wing, Chicago-school economist, pointed out in his book *Time on the Cross: the Economics of Negro Slavery* that most slaves were not whipped. He went on to say that slavery was not what we would imagine from reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* that it had a certain economic rationality. What he neglects to say is that physical abuse of slaves, even when not employed, was a constant threat. Most slaves, perhaps, weren't whipped but all of them witnessed or knew about beatings. Similarly, most kids in impoverished neighborhoods are not shot, but getting shot is a constant menace every time you go to the store or go outside. These are examples of medium- and low-frequency, but very high-intensity, threats.

There also are high-frequency, low-intensity insults, the daily harassment one can see, for instance, in African-American communities. There, one is constantly forced to make strategic decisions. Am I walking so slowly that the cop is going to think I'm loitering? Or, am I walking so fast that he or she will think that I'm running away from the scene of a crime? If I come onto campus at night to work in my laboratory, will I first be stopped by the police who think that I'm a thief? I remember once the resident commissioner of Puerto Rico was stopped by police on the way to his office in Washington. They laughed when he said he was a member of Congress and the resident commissioner. Ramos Antonini was black.

We are learning now from the study of neurotransmitters that

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our brain is not the only locus of social experience. The cerebrum gathers social experience and transmits it through many branches of the nervous system into the neurotransmitters. The neurotransmitters are chemically similar to substances in our immune system, in the white blood cells. In a certain sense, we think with our whole bodies, we feel with our whole bodies, and so the whole body is the locus of social experience that comes with these patterns of chronic conditions, of low-frequency threats or high-frequency insult. There are many dimensions to the experience of deprivation but they are often lost in the hands of the statisticians, who simply see poverty as a quantitative difference in income.

The Health Care for All Movement: This group champions a national health insurance system and has done much work comparing the American system to the Canadian system; many progressive physicians are active in this movement.

Alternative Medicine: The alternative health movement deals mostly with individual health. It stresses diet, exercise, homeopathy, chiropractic, and naturopathic remedies—areas where people feel that they have not been treated adequately by the established medical system. They draw on a holistic approach to health rather than the targeted, magic-bullet approach of traditional allopathic medicine. They seem to be particularly effective in dealing with long-term chronic conditions rather than acute emergencies. For instance, for those who need radiation and chemotherapy for cancer, alternative practices are helpful in modulating the negative side-effects. The strategy of modern medicine is that cancerous tissue is sufficiently fragile and can, in effect, be poisoned in the hope that the radiation or chemotherapy will kill the cancer more than it kills you. The approach employed by alternative therapies not to attack the cancer directly, but to try to build up the body's defenses. So the two approaches complement each other. Alternative medicine is very attractive and very powerful, but its primary appeal is to people who have control over their lives and access to the resources and techniques of alternative healthcare. It is not a mass movement; the holism it advocates stops at the edge of your skin. It is not a

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societal holism. Nonetheless, it is a powerful antidote to those movements that simply demand healthcare for all, without asking what kind of healthcare.

A Radical Critique

A radical critique of medicine has to deal with the things that make people sick and the kind and quality of healthcare people get. A Marxist approach to health would attempt to integrate the insights of ecosystem health, environmental justice, the social determination of health, "healthcare for all," and alternative medicine. One aspect of my approach to the issues of healthcare comes from my background as an ecologist. I looked at variability in health across geographic locations, occupational groups, age groups, or other socially defined categories. Just how variable, I asked, is the outcome in healthcare in different states in the United States, different counties in Kansas, different provinces in Cuba, different health districts in a Brazilian state, or in a Canadian province? Very interesting patterns emerged from that work. My colleagues and I examined the rate of infant mortality in each of these regions, both as an average and how, in each place, the rates varied, reflecting the quality of healthcare, among other factors, from the best to the worst. What we saw was that infant mortality rates in United States were more or less comparable to Cuba, that Kansas had a rate a little higher than the U.S. average, while Rio Grande do Sur in Brazil had a more typical, and much higher, third-world infant mortality rate. That Cuba scored so high was not very surprising.

However, when we viewed the same data from the perspective of the range from the best to the worst rates of infant mortality, that is, the variability within given populations, an effective measure of fairness, much more was revealed. The numbers for counties in Kansas showed the greatest variation, while the numbers that compared U.S. states showed somewhat less difference. The difference across health districts of Rio Grande was even less, and the least variation was in Cuba. Similar things happen when we look at all causes of death. Once again, we observed average rates as well as the disparity; we divided the

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variation, the difference between best and worst, by the average. For Kansas the range divided by the average is .85, but in Cuba it was .34. We saw that the cancer rates in Kansas and in Cuba are comparable, but the variability is higher in Kansas than in Cuba. When we examined Canadian data, we found that Saskatchewan was somewhere between Kansas and Cuba.

The reason we chose these places is that on the one hand Brazil, Canada, and Kansas all have capitalist economies in which investment decisions are based on maximizing profit rather than any social imperative meant to equalize economic circumstance. Saskatchewan and Rio Grande do Sur along with Cuba have national health systems that provide fairly uniform coverage over a given geographic area. The Canadian and Brazilian regions have the advantage of a better and more just healthcare system but, unlike Cuba, they have the disadvantages of capitalism, giving them an intermediate location in the variability of health outcomes.

This method can also be applied when comparing different diseases. One question we want to answer is whether variability will be greater across states and other large geographic regions, or across small areas like counties. There are good reasons why it might go either way. For example, weather could impact the data in large areas like states. But weather is not the only variable; others may vary greatly over smaller geographic units, only to be lost in the averages we develop for large areas. When we are able to look at smaller areas, for example, like different neighborhoods within the city of Wichita, Kansas, we find a threefold variation in infant mortality. We also notice that unemployment in Kansas averages 9 or 10 percent in most Kansas counties but is 30 percent in northeast Wichita. Why? Because neighborhoods are not simply random pieces of environment. They're structured. Wherever there is a rich neighborhood, you need a poor neighborhood, like northeast Wichita, to serve it. And so whenever we can get data across neighborhoods, we see very large variations in social conditions and, as a consequence, in the quality and quantity of healthcare—clearly unnecessary from the point of view of any limitation in our medical knowledge or resources.

Another interesting case can be found in Mexico, where a study

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was conducted of several villages, ranking them according to how marginalized they were from Mexican life. Examined were such variables as whether there was running water or what proportion of the people spoke Spanish. The research showed that the more marginal communities had worse health outcomes. But, unexpectedly, the data also showed that there was tremendous difference among the outcomes in poor villages that you didn't get among the villages that were integrated into the Mexican economy.

It is an as-yet-unrecognized ecological principle in public health that when a community or an individual organism is stressed for any reason (low income, a very severe climate, for example), it will be extremely sensitive to other disparities. So, if people have very low income, changing seasonal temperatures become very important. For example, in late autumn and early winter, emergency rooms have a lot of people coming in with burns from kerosene stoves, ovens, and other dangerous means used to compensate for inadequate heat in their houses. For such people, a small difference in temperature can have a big effect on their health—one that doesn't affect the more affluent. The same is true in relation to food. When people are unemployed, or if the prices go up, they cut back on food and other kinds of expenditures with an immediate impact on nutrition. If you are a superb shopper, and if you clip all the coupons and scrutinize the supermarket ads, you might just get by on the Department of Agriculture poverty level basket; the people who dream up these baskets assume you are a wiz at finding bargains. But suppose you are not so good, or that you read the ads but cannot get away for two hours for comparison shopping. Or that you live in a neighborhood where the local supermarket was not as profitable as the national chain that owned it thought it should be, and is gone, and with it your opportunity to get quality food. Or suppose that you would love to eat organic food for lunch but what you have is a half-hour break to go down to the vending machines. Under those circumstances, individual differences in where you work, how much energy you have, whether you can have a babysitter available or not, can have a big impact on your health.

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The Illusion of Choice

Poor health tends to cluster in poor communities. Conservatives will say, "well, obviously poverty is not good for you, but after all, not all kids turn out badly. I made it, why can't you? Some people have become CEOs of corporations who came out of that neighborhood." What they miss is the notion of increased vulnerability. The apparently trivial difference in experience can have a vast effect on the health of someone who is marginal. Suppose a pupil is a bit nearsighted but, because she is tall, is seated at the back of the classroom. The teacher is overworked and does not notice that the student cannot see the blackboard. She fidgets; she gets into a fight with the kid at the next desk. Suddenly she has become someone with a "learning problem" and is transferred to a vocational course even though she might have been great poet. In a more affluent community, where the classes are smaller and teachers pay attention, this kid would simply end up with glasses. Individual differences can come from anything, from personal experiences growing up, even from genetics. But even when genetics is responsible for a given human characteristic, it is only responsible within a particular context. For instance, in a factory emitting toxic fumes, people will develop cancer at a higher rate; those most likely to develop the cancer have livers that are not able to effectively process a particular chemical as well. This is a genetic variable and thus a genetic disease but it occurs only with exposure to those fumes. The cancer is not a result of genetics alone; it is also caused by the environment.

Trivial biological differences can become the focus around which important life outcomes are located; the most obvious is pigmentation. The difference in melanin between Americans of African and European origin is, from the point of view of genetics and physiology, trivial. It is simply the way in which a pigment is deposited in the skin. Yet this difference can cost you ten years of life. So is this a lethal gene? Is this a gene for a higher spread of pigmentation—one that also makes you more vulnerable to arrest? A standard geneticist would look at family histories and determine that if your uncle was arrested, there would be a

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higher probability of you being arrested as well. Conclusion: the cause of criminality is genetic. Following the rules of genetics in this mechanistic way, he or she will have proved that crime is hereditary. This makes as much sense as the notion that black people get more tuberculosis because they have bad genes. Genetics is not an alternative explanation of social conditions; it a component of an investigation of causal factors. There is an intimate interdependence among biological, genetic, environmental, and social factors.

Behavior is one of the areas where public health workers want to intervene, arguing that much that differentiates health outcomes in poor neighborhoods from rich ones can be associated with behavior, such as smoking, exercise, and diet. Conservatives, finally forced to concede that there are big differences in health outcomes between rich and poor, now say, "yes, this is because the poor make unwise decisions. The appropriate remedy is education. We know that kids do better if their mothers have had more schooling, so what we need are education programs to teach people to make the best of their situation." In fact, some health education programs are valuable. Safety orientation within factories does help people cope with unsafe conditions. But let us take a closer look at this question of choice. The Centers for Disease Control, and others who deal with these issues, say only some things can be chosen, while others are imposed by the environment. They would have us distinguish between disadvantages imposed on us, that may be unfair and/or can be eliminated, from those that were freely chosen and for which we can only blame ourselves. A Marxist confronted with choices among mutually exclusive categories like choice versus environment, heredity versus experience, biological versus social, knows that the categories themselves must be challenged. Choice also implies the lack of choice. Choices are always made from a set of alternatives that are presented to you by somebody else. We know this from elections and from shopping. We choose food, but only from the products a company has chosen to make available to us. The choice is distinguished by the lack of choice, that is, unchoice. The same is true with respect to the opportunity

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to exercise choice. There are always preconditions to the exercise of choice. If the conditions of life are very poor or oppressive, some of the things that are unwise choices under other circumstances become the lesser evil.

Public health people, like nearly everyone else, worry a great deal about teen pregnancies, which generally are not a good idea. Teen mothers are not experienced; they may have difficulty taking care of their babies; and the babies are more likely to be underweight. Nevertheless, it turns out that the health of a baby born to an African-American teenager is on the average better than the health of a baby born to an African-American woman in her twenties. Why? The environment of racism erodes health to such an extent that it makes a certain amount of sense to have your babies early if you're going to have them. This is something that is not obvious when you simply say, "teen pregnancy is a danger to people." We need to look at teen pregnancy in a much broader social context before we can think about making it simply a public health issue.

Smoking is another example. Smoking increases inversely with the degree of freedom one has at work. People who have few choices in life at least can make the choice to smoke. It is one of the few legitimate ways in some jobs to take a break and step outside. So there are people who choose: "yes," they say, "it might give me cancer in twenty years, but it sure keeps me alive today." The unhealthy choices people make are not irrational choices. We have to see them as constrained rationality, making the best of a bad situation. Most of the apparently unwise decisions people make have a relative rationality to them when their circumstance is taken into account, so it is unlikely their behavior will change simply by lecturing to them. You have to change the context within which choice is made.

Yet another dimension of choice is found in the way we perceive time. When making a choice about health, we assume that something we do now will have an impact later on. That may seem obvious, but it is not the experience of everyone. Most people, in fact, do not experience the kind or quality of freedom that gives them control over their own lives, that would allow

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them to say, "I will quit smoking now so that I won't get cancer in twenty years." Not everyone can organize their lives along an orderly annual time scale. In the inner city of San Juan, in Puerto Rico, the life pattern is such that one can work unloading a ship for twenty-three hours a day for two days, then sleep for three days, then unexpectedly work in a restaurant for another two days because his or her cousin has to go to a funeral in the mountains. Time does not have the same structure when you can't make solid plans now for what is going to happen to you later.

On the other hand, the lives of, say, academics are notable for the way time is organized. Students can and do choose courses of study that, in two or three years, will prepare them for a career. On a shorter time scale, a professor may conveniently order his or her teaching schedule around patterns of Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, or Tuesday and Thursday. Physicians decide when to see patients, when to be in the library, when to go to seminars. So some people can actually structure their lives in such a way that we can actually make predictions. Not absolute predictions, obviously. Things can come up; we can be hit by a car. But, basically, the more control you have over your life and your experience of life, the more it makes sense to make the kind of decisions that public health experts recommend, the more the possibility, then, of exercising choice. So the answer to those who talk about decision-making and choice is to tell them, first of all, to expand the range of choices. Secondly, they need to provide the tools for making those choices. Third, of course, people need to control their own lives, so that they can exercise all their faculties to make meaningful choices. In taking each of these steps, we directly challenge the false dichotomies that rule thinking about public health and constrain it within predetermined societal boundaries.

What Can Be Done?

At a recent meeting I attended, a paper was distributed that posed the following dilemma: Why, living in a democracy, where all citizens have the vote, do we permit policies that create inequalities that have such a negative impact on our health? How

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do we explain this? We have schemes to improve agriculture but they increase hunger. We create hospitals and they become the centers for the propagation of new diseases. We invest in engineering projects to control floods and they increase flood damage. What has gone wrong? One answer might be that we are just not smart enough. Or the problems are just too complicated, or we are selfish, or we have some defect. Or, after having failed to eliminate hunger, improve people's health, and do away with inequalities, and failed, perhaps we need to face facts and conclude that it just cannot be done. Or perhaps we're just the kind of species that is incapable of living a cooperative life in a sensible relation to nature.

We should reject any of these unduly pessimistic conclusions. The history of struggle is long and not without achievements. But struggle is also difficult. For example, it is easy to depend on the illusion of democracy and a beneficent government to solve our problems. But when we look at the policies that emerge from those institutions of democracy, we see that those ostensibly aimed at improving the people's lives are nearly always hobbled by some hidden side condition. For instance, I am sure that on the whole, President Clinton would rather have people covered by health insurance than not. But that is subject to the side condition that insurance industry profitability must be protected. He probably would like medicines to be cheaper, but only if the pharmaceutical industry continues to make high profits. Abroad, the United States would like peasants to have land, but only if not expropriated from plantation owners. The basic reason that programs fail is not incompetence, ignorance, or stupidity, but because they are constrained by the interests of the powerful. Sometimes we discover that part of a program is carried out successfully, and part not. An enterprise zone might be established in an inner city that actually brings in investment, but there is no impact on poverty because the assumption that benefits would trickle down was an illusion. A reasonable return on investment was the goal of the developers. When that was achieved, nothing else mattered.

A good way to see how these hidden constraints, these systemic

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barriers, operate is in the delivery of health services elsewhere. Healthcare in the United States exists against background of this country's unrestrained capitalism. We have described at length both the prospects and problems of that system. But, in Europe, social democrats historically have taken a different approach—one that acknowledges inequality as an obstacle. They have treated unemployment, for example, as a social problem rather than an inevitable byproduct of a vigorous market. A town council will address it by financing a center for the unemployed, with counselors to advise them of their right to unemployment insurance and other benefit programs. The center may even organize a support group where people can deal with their feelings about not being able to bring home an income to the family. Local governments can address other social concerns. In London, there is a program to break down the isolation of young mothers, where they can meet one another, share experiences, and provide support. Of course, none of these measures affects profitability or challenges the market. So the council cannot create employment. Even the most farsighted programs initiated by European social democratic governments do not challenge the capitalist order in any way. What they do is to try to make things more equitable—for instance, through progressive income taxes or generous unemployment insurance. In Sweden, transport workers demanded improved food to reduce heart disease among truck drivers. They organized to improve the quality of food in the roadside canteens and collaborated with restaurant owners and canteen owners and food was improved. In other places, unions have negotiated collective agreements to change shift work, hours of work, and working conditions. The unions recognized that health concerns were but another aspect of class relations.

In some cases improving on-the-job health is relatively cost-free. No employer will object to putting up a sign reminding workers to wear their hard hats on the construction site. But it begins to get a little tricky when you talk about the reorganization of work or the expenditure of money. If the expenditure of money comes from taxes, through government programs to

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improve health, we can expect the business class to object. And if, after each new expenditure, they perceive some interference with their competitive position, their opposition may take some political form, for example, the repeal of some aspect of health and safety regulation. When an expenditure has to come from the individual employer, perhaps by way of a union demand, they will be even more resistant. They will say that it is bad for competition and threaten to close down and move somewhere else. If the union's demands deal with the organization of work itself, management will see workers impinging on the very core of class prerogative. In that situation, only a powerful and well-organized labor movement will be able to impose changes.

When health policy is looked at from the point of view of which issues involve a direct confrontation of fundamental, ruling-class interest, which ones involve simply relative benefits to a class, and which are relatively neutral, we can predict which kinds of measures are possible. This highlights the lie in the notion that society is trying to improve health for everybody. We need to see healthcare in a more complex way. Health is part of the wage goods of a society, part of the value of labor power, and therefore a regular object of contention in class struggle. But health is also a consumer good, particularly for the affluent, who can buy improvements in health for themselves. Rather than improve water quality, they buy bottled water; rather than improve air quality, they employ oxygen tanks in their living rooms. Health is also a commodity invested in by the health industries, including, hospitals, HMOs, and pharmaceutical companies. They sell healthcare to as large a market as can afford to pay for it; they even push it on people who do not need it. Like any aggressive business, the health industries engage in public relations—the winning of hearts and minds. Some of the clinics that were established in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War and earlier, during the Malayan insurrection, were for this purpose. Doctors, at great sacrifice, would go into the jungle and set up clinics and work very hard under very difficult conditions for low pay, seeing themselves either as bringing benefits to people who needed it or, more consciously, as trying to prevent communism.

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It was yet another reincarnation of the White Man's Burden that justified nineteenth-century imperialism.

If good health depends on one's capacity to carry out those activities that are necessary and appropriate according to one's station in life, it matters how that station is determined. Those who can determine for themselves what constitutes necessary and desirable activities are clearly different from the people who have that determination made for them. This distinction is clear when an employer negotiates health insurance for his or her employees; for the employer, the cost of the benefits package will always come before what employees may think they need. So health is always a point of contention in class struggle. So is medical and scientific research; knowledge and ignorance are determined, as in all scientific research, by who owns the research industry, who commands the production of knowledge production. There is class struggle in the debates around what kind of research ought to be done. Increasingly, research in the health field is dominated by the pharmaceutical and electronic industries.

There are intellectual concerns about how to analyze data, about how to think about disease, about how widely we need to look at the epidemiological, historical, and social questions they raise; there are also issues of health service and health policy. But they are all part of one integral system that has to be our battleground in the future. We have to take up health as a pervasive issue as we do with problems of the environment; they are aspects of class struggle, not an alternative to it.

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CORRESPONDENCE

We regret that the following tributes arrived too late to appear in our April 2000 issue, celebrating the 90th birthday of founding editor Paul M. Sweezy. We are delighted to be able to include them here.

Michael Lebowitz

Over ten years ago, in Maxine Berg's *Political Economy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Philip Allan, 1990), I began an article on Paul's work as follows: "Described by the *Wall Street Journal* as the 'Dean' of radical economics, Paul Sweezy has more than any other single person kept Marxist economics alive in North America" (131). I had in mind, of course, that remarkable sequence of work from the thirties through the eighties that Paul had produced. Yet, the statement was not entirely accurate because it was a particular type of Marxist economics associated with Paul (and, of course, with *Monthly Review*). Paul did not spend his time (as so many academic Marxists do) in elaborate calculations as to how a falling rate of profit would bring capitalism down or expounding sophisticated versions of Neo-Ricardian value theory—both of which he rejected in his early classic, *The Theory of Capitalist Development;* nor, in the same way, did he assign much importance to finding the correct solution to the "transformation problem." The *leitmotiv* that has run through Paul's work has been capital's tendency toward overaccumulation (and on the various forms of its countertendencies). And that has meant a stress on what is unique to capitalism—on the manner in which capital by its very nature moves in a direction that is away from the satisfaction of human needs and the development of human potential. It's meant that Paul has helped us keep our eyes on the prize. That article also commented that "after over a half century of Marxist scholarship, the Dean of radical economics continues to guide (and to receive graciously) younger colleagues and students" (132). I was referring there, of course, to myself among so many others. Thank you, Paul, and a happy 90th to you.

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Lawrence Lifschultz

In 1968, on his return from a journey through South America, a correspondent for the *Catholic Reporter* noted with some surprise that the two most respected and well-known Americans in Latin America after Abraham Lincoln were Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman. This impression, as I subsequently discovered, was not merely confined to the western hemisphere. In 1973, sitting in the Workers' Cooperative Coffee House in Calcutta with a group of Bengali writers for the Calcutta weekly, *Frontier,* I was peppered with questions about Sweezy's theory of monopoly capital and Magdoff's views on imperialism. During my later years as a foreign correspondent in South Asia, the "Monthly Review Phenomenon" was to recur in far-off places, from Baluchistan in Pakistan to Chittagong in Bangladesh. There was a constant refrain: what did I think of such-and-such article in *Monthly Review*?

I had first heard Paul speak at Yale in 1969 at a seminar led by Ken Mills, a young philosophy professor. The seminar room was much too small for the size of the crowd that turned up and we shifted to the larger Branford College Common Room. Shortly afterwards, I was asked by Ken Mills to summarize those chapters from *Monopoly Capital* which centered on the stagnation thesis. It was my first encounter with the concept of "capital overaccumulation," which some years later was to lead me to Hobson, Keynes, Kalecki, and Steindl. After more than a year in rural India, I made my way through Bengal and Burma, and began a long journey through the war zones of Indochina. On my return from Vietnam, I was ready to systematically approach Marx.

Back in the United States, I asked a friend's father, who once had been in the German socialist movement, for a list of readings. He suggested that I contact a man with whom he regularly played tennis and who was a "renowned Marxist economist" and "not a bad tennis player." It should be easy to find him, he told me, since Paul Sweezy lived across a small tidal channel hardly a hundred yards from my parents' home. At the mention of Paul's name, I remembered the seminar at Yale and the Workers'

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Cooperative Coffee House in Calcutta and the many questions I had been asked which I had not been able to answer. I had circled the globe in search of a neighbor!

Thus began a long, enriching, and wonderful friendship like few others I have known. Nevertheless, it began a bit suspiciously. Over lunch at Paul's house, we leafed through *Capital* and as ever, he suggested an unorthodox approach. Start at the back of the book, Paul recommended. I was somewhat skeptical, having been used to reading books the other way around. Ultimately, it made good sense to try to understand Marx's historical chapters before tangling with more esoteric concepts like "exchange value."

The following year, Paul taught a seminar on *Capital* at Yale's Berkeley College. I was fortunate to be a member. As I recall, Rick Levin, now President of Yale, and at that time something of a critic of neoclassical theory, used to drop in at the seminar. Robert Triffin, the renowned international monetary economist, was then Master of Berkeley College. Being a European social democrat and a friend of Paul's from Harvard, Triffin held Paul in high regard. Having been skeptical of "perfect competition" theory since his graduate school days, Triffin had none of the "neoclassical" hangups of several leading lights of the Yale Economics Department.

Paul has been our teacher. He has introduced us to powerful tools of analysis by which to understand both our history and the present. Moreover, he has consistently eschewed the dogmatic formulations that have drained many socialist movements of their heart and soul. In my view, he always has had that essential quality that Sartre once described as the ability "to break the bones" in one's head in order to think about new situations within the framework of enduring principles.

In May 1949, Paul and Leo set out on a mission to educate, to deepen our understanding of modern capitalism and to explore a socialist alternative to the mass misery that has been the bedrock of modern capitalism (i.e., globalization) for four centuries. Like thousands of others, I was educated at the University of *Monthly Review*. It is a small campus but its graduates number in the tens of thousands and they can be found in the most

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remote corners of the world where both critical thought and action still endure.

John Mage

The foremost privilege in my life has been working with Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff. Paul in the last ten years has focused his energy more intently as his physical powers have waned. I have watched closely how he has helped to steer *MR*'s course through the various narrows of the last several years, and his ultimate practical rule has been a question of point of view. That is, that all interesting social questions, of theory and practice alike, can and should be asked from the perspective of the propertyless majority of humankind. A second ultimate rule: keep it short. My love and gratitude to Paul Sweezy.

Michael Yates

I taught my first economics class in 1969. One day in the introductory course, I got so disgusted with the formality and vacuousness of the textbook that I threw it and my notes on the floor and told the students we were going to discuss more relevant issues, namely the war in Vietnam. We did, and the class went reasonably well, but afterwards I was still emotionally keyed up, so I went to the library to read a sports magazine and calm down. As I was perusing the magazine rack, I came across a small magazine called *Monthly Review* and subtitled "An Independent Socialist Magazine." Hmm! I read an article, then another, then the whole magazine. I went into the stacks and got some back issues and read them too. I subscribed that day and have been hooked ever since.

Soon I was an associate, buying *MR* books by the boxful. Whatever Paul and Harry wrote, I read. These works made ideas race through my head. I incorporated them into my lectures. They made me want to write too. I sent my first submission to *MR* in 1972; it was a critique of an article *MR* had published by Joan Robinson. Paul sent me the nicest rejection letter I have ever received. I still have it. He liked my piece but thought it might be too technical for *MR*'s readers. He encouraged me to

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send future articles to *MR*. I was on cloud nine. Paul Sweezy, the great economist, had actually sent me a personal note, a respectful note, an encouraging note.

Paul has sent me other letters, and Harry too. Always, their generosity shone through. Many years ago, I invited them to come to my campus for a symposium on the economy. I was amazed that they agreed; I was astounded at how little they requested as remuneration. It was wonderful to meet them, to hear them speak, to have dinner and breakfast with them, and to get Paul to sign my tattered copy of *Monopoly Capital*.

Over the years, I have had three books and eighteen articles and reviews published by *MR*. Paul and Harry gave me my chance and I will always be grateful. Not just a chance to see my writing published, but a chance to make some small contribution to the struggle for a new and better society, to be a part of something greater than myself. I don't know anyone else who would have given me this opportunity. A child of the working class, teaching at a small school in Johnstown, Pennsylvania just does not count in the academic world, even among the progressives. So, a belated happy birthday, Paul. And a heartfelt thanks to you and to Harry and to Renee and Martin and all the wonderful folks at *MR*.

The primal need of the working class is education. By education, I mean revolutionary education; the kind that enables men to see that the . . . millions of wage workers in the United States are wage-slaves; that the economic interests of these many millions of human beings who do all the useful work and produce all the wealth are absolutely identical; that they must unite; that they must act together; that they must assert their collective power. When they reach this point, they will cease to be slaves and become the masters of the situation; they will wipe out the wage-system and walk the earth free men.

—Eugene V. Debs

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BOOKS

Marx's Ecological Value Analysis

by John Bellamy Foster

Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 312 pp., $45, hardcover.

If there is a single charge that has served to unify all criticism of Marx in recent decades, it is the charge of "Prometheanism." Although Marx's admiration for Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and his attraction to Prometheus as a revolutionary figure of Greek mythology has long been known, the accusation that Marx's work contained at its heart a "Promethean motif," and that this constituted the principal weakness of his entire analysis, seems to have derived its contemporary influence mainly from Leszek Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism.* The first volume of this work was drafted in Polish in 1968 and appeared in English in 1978. For Kolakowski:

> A typical feature of Marx's Prometheanism is his lack of interest in the natural (as opposed to economic) conditions of human existence, the absence of corporal human existence in his vision of the world. Man is wholly defined in purely social terms; the physical limits of his being are scarcely noticed. Marxism takes little or no account of the fact that people are born and die, that they are men or women, young or old, healthy or sick; that they are genetically unequal, and that all these circumstances affect social development irrespective of the class division, and set bounds to human plans for perfecting the world. . . . Marx can scarcely admit that man is limited either by his body or by geographical conditions. As his argument with Malthus showed, he refused to believe in the possibility of absolute overpopulation, as determined by the earth's area and natural resources. . . . Demography was not an independent force but an element in

John Bellamy Foster is the author, most recently, of *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

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> the social structure, to be evaluated accordingly. Marx's ignoring of the body and physical death, sex and aggression, geography and human fertility—all of which he turns into purely social realities—is one of the most characteristic yet most neglected features of his Utopia.[1]

It is not surprising, given the nature of this charge, that Kolakowski's condemnation of Marx for his Prometheanism would be embraced by commentators on Marx and ecology. It was soon echoed by Anthony Giddens in *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (1981), in which he complained of Marx's "Promethean attitude," which supposedly explained why "Marx's concern with transforming the exploitative human social relations expressed in class systems does not extend to the exploitation of nature." Since then it has been a steady drumbeat, with left ecological thinkers as various as Ted Benton, Reiner Grundmann, John Clark, and Michael Löwy adding their own complaints of Marx's Promethean disregard for nature.[2]

What is most remarkable about this criticism (derived by imposing on Marx a motif supposedly taken from Greek mythology—which Kolakowski tries to link more firmly to Marx by way of Lucretius, Bruno, and Goethe) is that it effectively substitutes a mythological symbol (one not analyzed in itself) for genuine critique.[3] The claim that Marx failed to take into account natural limits is entirely without foundation. Even Marx's critique of Malthus, where Kolakowski would appear to have made his strongest point, demonstrates this. Marx and Engels did not deny demographic factors or the absolute limits to human expansion on the earth. Ironically, it was Malthus, and not Marx, who steered clear of the term "overpopulation"—because in his strictly equilibrium model of population and food supply, this was unthinkable and because he made a point of insisting that his argument was *not* about overpopulation as determined by the carrying capacity of the earth as whole, but that the pressure of population on food supply was inherent in the human condition from the very beginning.[4]

As for the contention that Marx simply disregarded issues of life, death, and sexuality, one need only think of the detailed discussion of the effects of absolute exploitation on the health

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of workers and their families in Marx's treatment of the struggle over the working day in volume one of *Capital* or his focus on parental and spousal abuse, abortion, and the exploitation of women (not to mention life and death) in "Peuchet on Suicide."[5]

Significantly, it is in the ecological realm, where Kolakowski's charge that Marx fell prey to a simple-minded Prometheanism has been most frequently alluded to, that we also find the most decisive refutations. Here Paul Burkett's masterful work, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective*, stands out. It focuses on the area where Marx's alleged Prometheanism would seem to have its firmest grounding—his mature critique of political economy.

Marx and Nature is divided into three parts. Part One, entitled "Nature and Historical Materialism," addresses the natural bases of labor and production in Marx. Part Two, entitled "Nature and Capitalism," offers a systematic account of Marx's ecological value analysis. Part Three, entitled "Nature and Communism," provides a developed critique of the "Promethean interpretation" of Marx based on these foundations, while revealing the ecological aspects of Marx's vision of communism.

In Part One of his book, Burkett begins by establishing that, for Marx, nature is one of the sources—along with labor or labor power—in the creation of wealth. Genuine wealth consists of use values, which are produced only with the help of nature. Not only do all material use values that go into the making of a commodity have a basis in natural resources, but also there are natural use values, according to Marx, which are completely independent of production but without which production would be impossible. Indeed, the "universal metabolic process" of nature transcends the realm of production. Human production depends principally on the organization of labor power but the labor itself is, in its essence, nothing but the metabolic process between human beings and nature. Labor can only work as nature does (as a vital natural force or as transformed energy), by changing the form of matter. Far from ignoring natural conditions and limits, as some critics have claimed (alleging that Marx was simply Promethean in this respect), Burkett demonstrates that he built such natural conditions into his analysis of human production,

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and even into his conception of nature transcending human production, in myriad ways.

But if Marx insists on the natural basis of human production and its dependence on natural conditions, he nevertheless avoids what Burkett calls a "crudely naturist" approach, insisting at every point that human production is socially mediated production and occurs within a coevolutionary context. Thus, human production partially (but only partially) transcends its natural bases; and indeed it is the alienation of social and natural conditions that must be at the center of our attention. "It is not the *unity* of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their appropriation of nature," Marx writes, "which requires explanation or is the result of a historic process, but rather the *separation* between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labour and capital."[6] It is this general conception, as Burkett argues, that prevents Marx from being either a one-sided "naturist" or a one-sided "social constructionist." Rather, his treatment throughout is concerned with the dialectical interaction between nature and human society (which remains a part of nature). Human freedom and self-creation is a reality, but it is circumscribed in that it does not exist independently and in defiance of natural conditions and natural laws. Not only does this realistic outlook govern Marx's critique of capitalist society, Burkett argues, it also helps to explain Marx's understanding of the future society of associated producers.

Nevertheless, for all of its insights, Part One of Burkett's book is difficult reading. This is not simply a product of the complexity of the discussion at this point, but also of the high level of abstraction. Here, Burkett is writing (following Marx's method) at the level of production in general, divorced from its historically specific forms and hence divorced from Marx's critique of capital itself. Thus, Burkett proceeds in Part Two to the consideration of nature *and capitalism*, and to an exposition of Marx's ecological value analysis. It is here that the heart of Burkett's book, his real breakthroughs in the interpretation of Marx, are

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to be found—leading into his formidable discussion of Marx's vision of communism in Part Three. Here, too, the argument of the book becomes easier to follow, since it now takes on a more historically specific focus, directly connected to Marx's value analysis and to his critique of capital as a social relation.

Part Two opens with a consideration of the conditions that make capitalism (particularly industrial capitalism) possible, with the separation of the workers from the natural conditions of production, i.e., from the land. Primitive accumulation thus represents the growth not only of alienated labor, but also of alienated nature—as Marx recognized as early as 1844. Burkett then takes on what is in many ways the central issue in the criticism of Marx's political ecology, that is, the question of the "free appropriation" of nature under capitalism—i.e., the fact that nature is seen by capital as lacking in value, since no labor time is utilized in its production. Numerous thinkers have criticized Marx and the labor theory of value for being blind to nature's intrinsic value and to the real social costs associated with the degradation of nature. Yet Marx's ecological value analysis is superior to all others in this respect, because it shows not only that nature's production is viewed by the system as a "free gift of nature" to capital but also demonstrates, through its treatment of use value, that nature is an essential part of the creation of wealth and, indeed, the ultimate source of all wealth. Hence capitalism (in denying value to nature, which is given a money value based on monopolistic rents, if at all), systematically downgrades nature's contribution to wealth, generating bigger and bigger ecological problems.

The strength of Burkett's approach is that he recognizes that Marx was not only a proponent of the labor theory of value of classical economics but that he was also an opponent, not in the sense that he chose to formulate some other theory of the law of value under capitalism, but because he sought to overcome capital's law of value itself, along with capitalist society. Marx is able therefore to pinpoint the narrow criteria by which the law of value operates, while perceiving that this is not due to some failure of analysis but, rather, represents a central contradiction

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of capitalism itself.

Capitalism's ecological crises, Burkett explains in his exposition of Marx, take two forms: "(1) crises of capital accumulation, based on imbalances between capital's material requirements and the natural conditions of raw materials production; and (2) a more general crisis in the *quality* of human-social development, stemming from the disturbances in the circulation of matter and life forces that are generated by capitalism's industrial division of town and country" (107). The first of these crises arises from capital's tendency to increase the flow of commodities and hence the throughput of materials and energy, with little concern for natural limits, while economizing much more stringently on labor inputs. "Rising productivity means that each hour of abstract labor is now borne in a larger and larger quantity of use values and their material prerequisites" (110). This results in periodic problems in the availability of materials and energy needed as inputs into the production process. Yet, although this raises the issue of conservation for capitalism, the system's laws of motion are antithetical to any truly ecological approach to conservation.

More important, because even more central, to Marx's analysis is the ecological critique arising from his understanding (and that of Engels) of the ecological contradictions arising from the division between town and country under industrial capitalism. It is here that Marx presents his analysis of the rift in the metabolism between human society and nature that arises from the break in the soil nutrient cycle—evident in the despoliation of the soil and the pollution of the cities. Burkett emphasizes the dialectical character of Marx's understanding of ecological crises here in order to refute those who contend that Marx addressed ecological problems only in relation to agriculture (the country) and did not consider them also in relation to industry (the city).[7] It is Marx's recognition of environmental crises stemming from these causes that provides the basis for Burkett's contention that the "environmental critique of capitalist production is a recurring theme in the writings of Marx and Engels" (126).

In Part Three, on "Nature and Communism," Burkett provides a direct refutation of what he calls the "Promethean interpreta-

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tion" of Marx's ecological analysis. According to the Promethean interpretation, Burkett tells us, capitalism solves the problems of history and the human relation of nature through sheer productivity and abundance—that is, quantitatively. For example, Alec Nove argued that, since capitalism ushered in a world of affluence in Marx's view, "the problem of production has been 'solved'" and the future society of associated producers "would not have to take seriously the problem of the allocation of scarce resources." Therefore the issue of an ecologically conscious socialism simply does not arise in Marx, Nove tells us.[8] Yet, it is worth remembering that not only did Marx deny that capitalism had solved the *quantitative problem* of production (for example, he insisted that capitalism was unable to solve the problems of agricultural production) but he also laid even more emphasis on the *qualitative problem* of capitalist society—a society rooted in the alienation not only of human labor but also of nature, that is, a rift in the human metabolism with nature (164). Indeed, "the fundamental contradiction of capitalism," Burkett reminds us, consists of such twofold alienation of human community and of the human relation to nature—and the development of production and wealth-creation in a narrow, exploitative form.

By focusing on the ecological dimensions of Marx's thought (and particularly on what has been referred to here as Marx's ecological value analysis), Burkett is able to provide the beginnings of a truly profound interpretation of Marx's vision of communism—one of the very few analyses to do justice to its wide-ranging nature. Earlier interpretations of Marx's vision of communism have generally fallen prey to excessive concern with purely quantitative issues. Burkett, however, is able to describe the qualitative revolution in the entire social and ecological metabolism that such a transformation necessarily involves. Here he notes that many thinkers have been misled by the undeniable fact that Marx, who saw socialist revolution as imminent, placed little direct emphasis on ecological contradictions in causing/motivating such a transformation. It was thus assumed that environmental considerations were not fundamental to the construction of the society of associated producers (129; 199). Yet,

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in Marx's concrete discussions of socialist construction, as distinct from the revolution against capitalism, he always highlighted ecological factors, and the need for a rational regulation of the human relation to nature in accordance both with the needs of human freedom and community and principles of sustainability. Hence, the construction of communism for Marx was a "struggle," as Burkett says, "for a real socialization of nature"—divorced from the distorted form that it assumed under the regime of private property (214).

Marx argued in the *Grundrisse* that nature (or the soil) originally appears as "the direct wellspring of production." Capitalism breaks this original unity by making society into the necessary mediator (though in alienated form) between nature and production. Hence, in order for humankind to develop its own rich possibilities for free development and to realize its essential unity with nature at a higher level, it is necessary that there be a genuine socialization of production: the development of a "real social community."[9] In Burkett's closing words:

> If people want to develop as natural beings, they must develop further as social beings, and achieve an explicit socialization of the natural conditions of production. We cannot overcome natural necessity—we cannot conquer nature; but neither can we ignore the conscious, social, and cumulative character of human production by taking refuge in an idealized, unmediated nature that no longer exists. The development of human production is no longer predetermined by nature as such. So if we want to live with nature, we must master our social organization (257).

The importance of Marx's ecological value analysis, for Burkett, lies precisely in the fact that it traces capitalism's fundamental contradiction to the alienation of nature and the alienation of human production, as two sides of a single contradiction—one that can only be overcome by a revolutionary transformation of society itself. Any analysis of Marx's work that fails to understand this dialectic of nature and society is one-sided and incomplete—vulnerable to the mechanistic Prometheanism that characterizes not so much Marxism as the hegemonic vision of political economy inherited from bourgeois civilization.

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NOTES

1. Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 412-414.
2. Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 59-60; Ted Benton, "Marxism and Natural Limits," *New Left Review*, no. 178 (November-December 1989), p. 82; Reiner Grundmann, *Marxism and Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 52; Michael Löwy, "For a Critical Marxism," *Against the Current*, vol. 12, no. 5 (November-December 1997), pp. 33-34.
3. The myth of Prometheus as it was understood in the Romantic period, and by Marx, had more to do with Enlightenment and the critique of religion (that is, with the development of a general revolutionary consciousness) than with an emphasis on technology. See Walt Sheasby, "Anti-Prometheus, Post-Marx: The Real and the Myth in Green Theory," *Organization & Environment*, vol. 12, no. 1 (March 1999), pp. 5-44.
4. See John Bellamy Foster, "Malthus' *Essay on Population* at Age 200," *Monthly Review*, vol. 50, no. 7 (December 1998), pp. 1-18 and *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), chapter 3.
5. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1976), pp. 389-411, and "Peuchet on Suicide," in Eric A. Plaut and Kevin Anderson, eds., *Marx on Suicide* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), pp. 45, 53-54, 57-58. See also the excellent introductory essay by Kevin Anderson.
6. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 489.
7. See John Bellamy Foster, "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 105, no. 2 (September 1999), pp. 366-405, and *Marx's Ecology*, chapter 5.
8. Alec Nove, "Socialism," in John Eatwell, Murray Milgate, and Peter Newman, eds., *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, vol. 4 (New York: Stockton, 1987), p. 399.
9. Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 276.

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Fathers and Sons

by Annette T. Rubinstein

Tony Hiss, *The View from Alger's Window: A Son's Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 241 pp., $24, hardcover.

The View from Alger's Window is a fascinating book. Even if the father and son who share the stage in this memoir were completely anonymous, it would still be an absorbing story. Probably for most readers, however, and surely for almost all *Monthly Review* subscribers, the father's name will reverberate with what Jack Gelber's *Nation* review describes as a Nixon-manipulated "story of well-timed leaks, stage-managed press conferences, masterful misleading language." But as the author himself says, a major objective of his work is to "transform Alger Hiss from a case to a person." This he has certainly done.

A second objective (which was also, for me at least, completely realized) is the son's hope that the evidence of some 2500 personal letters exchanged between Alger and his wife in over a quarter of a century, including 425 written to wife and son from prison, would force any reasonable doubter to share his conviction that his father could never have committed the perjury of which he was convicted, let alone the treason with which he was never actually legally charged.

But Alger is not the only protagonist in this story. He had foolishly volunteered to appear before the Un-American Activities Committee and was forced to go to Washington on the day of Tony's seventh birthday party. That childish disappointment had apparently long been forgotten when, the night before his own son's seventh birthday, forty-year-old Tony woke with a

Annette T. Rubinstein is an editor of *Science and Society* and the author of *The Great Tradition in English Literature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1953) and *American Literature: Root and Flower* (distributed by Monthly Review Press).

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blinding headache and a nightmare fear that he would not be able to attend Jacob's party the next day. Of course he did and the fear was happily exorcised, but in a sense this entire book is a prolonged exorcism. It centers on the six years of his father's trials and imprisonment, with a substantial prelude describing Alger's long, close relationship with and lifelong adoration of his surrogate father, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, as well as a brief summary of Alger's forty-three postprison years.

We see four of those years in some detail through memories of monthly prison visits and the precious two one-page letters weekly permitted prisoners. Tony shares with us his adult understanding of the way in which his undemonstrative, reserved father deliberately reformed himself to reveal emotions, to express quirky private observations, to create an intimacy with the son for whom he had earlier been, and would probably otherwise always have remained, a "world-travelling, dazzling, handsome, hardworking, so-often-away-from-home" impersonal father.

While the heart of the book and a great part of our actual reading pleasure lies in the generous pages of quotation from those letters, we also become deeply involved in the desperate struggles of the lonely youngster to keep his head above water. He gives us a vivid account of his blind attempts to deal with real hardships and far-worse nightmare apprehensions, to internalize his parents' Quaker convictions that one must not hate and that understanding always leads to forgiveness and pity. There is still suppressed resentment evident in a memory of one of the few preachy letters which Alger wrote when Tony reported an attack by three bigger boys on his way home from school.

Apparently, the overwhelming majority of the letters are far better advised. Clearly hours of thought were spent on each of these brief compositions to create a common world for writer and reader. Whether Alger describes a rare bird glimpsed through his prison window; tells the progress of a BG (beginning reader) whom he is tutoring and, later, rejoices in BG's promotion to MR (middle reader); asks Tony to visit and report on an art exhibit advertised in the *Times*; or offers another episode of the eagerly awaited saga of the SLB (Sugar Lump Boy), an

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extremely maladroit, fictional youngster whom Tony, himself not very athletic, could teach to swim—whatever the subject, every word of these spirited, seemingly spontaneous notes is designed to cement the foundation of what happily proved to be a lifelong father-son friendship.

In addition to this central, highly personal emphasis, the book gives us a poignant sketch of a long, loving marriage and an unhappy, blameless separation. There are also some surprising factual nuggets gleaned from the autobiography and correspondence of James Bennet, then-Director of Federal Prisons.

An extremely interesting short account of Tony's stepbrother, to whom the book is in part dedicated, breaks new ground. Tim had been an eighteen-year-old Navy cadet in 1945 and was given an "undesirable" discharge after privately asking the Navy doctor's advice about coming to terms with his bisexual inclinations. Since he had been an observant eight-year-old at the time when Chambers claimed to have been an intimate friend and frequent visitor of the Hisses, Alger's lawyer wished to call him in support of their denial. As Tim much later told Tony, "I wanted to testify but Alger wouldn't have it. He told his lawyers, 'I'd rather go to jail than see Tim cross-examined about his private life.'" However ill-advised Alger's decision was for himself, his fears about what the consequences might have been for the young medical student were well-founded. Tim reports, "I don't know how many man-hours the FBI spent interviewing everyone I had ever lived with or slept with."

As is no doubt already apparent, the view from Alger's window is not a single or even a double but a triple one; it is a space defined by the father and seen twice by the son—first as a child, then as a man. There are, however, through all the variations, at least two strikingly consistent elements. The first is an extraordinary sensitivity to place and scene, whether a wood or a city street. The way in which individual sunsets, for example, are noted and described by both father and son, and later presented to grandson, seem a happy fulfillment of Wordsworth's wish that all our days and nights "might be/bound to each other by natural piety." The second consistency is more ambiguous.

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There seems to be a curious naiveté in the way in which both father and son interpret history. Tony reports with no apparent disagreement, or at least not as an absurdity, Tim's belief that if Alger had been acquitted and continued as head of the Carnegie Peace Endowment "speaking out on behalf of the United Nations and other New Deal ideas, maybe that could have exerted a moderating influence on the Cold War and helped keep McCarthy from gaining a foothold. . . . Maybe we might even have been spared the Korean War or the Vietnam War!"

More tellingly, in his own attempt to analyze Chambers' seemingly unmotivated malignancy and the enormous media or political support the liar received, Tony perceptively describes the envious hatred for his father as a symbol—"He has a daily beauty in his life that makes mine ugly"—but seems completely unaware of the powerful interests the anticommunist hysteria served. His own explanation of the period is the rare and fortuitous appearance of two phenomena—an A and a B syndrome—not too dangerous singly but devastating in conjunction. A is the existence of "serial liars" and B is a general state of anger and fear caused by a number of "hot button" issues.

Alger's own analysis in a letter to his wife and son dated March 10, 1953, reads in part:

> These are not normal times in our country. Many people are confused or frightened so that they are not naturally—happily—helping each other. And—a strange thing—it is so natural and necessary for all to love and help that one who stops gets twisted . . . When President Roosevelt was alive, he encouraged most people to bring out their natural kindness; . . . and Adlai Stevenson had some of this quality as thee and many others realized. . . .

The only other bit of explicit political comment in the book is quoted from a letter written by a favorite uncle, Prossy's youngest brother, Tom Fansler. He alone seemed immediately to recognize the real danger of the situation, if not its cause, and wrote Alger on November 16, 1952:

> There is a war on and the fight is to the death. The war is not a war between haves and have nots but between the grabbers and the givers . . . between the haters and those who love. Unfortunately, the commies have made political capital out of lining

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> themselves up with many of the 'causes' for which those who love strive. Hence *all* that side is now coming to be labeled with the tag of communism. Everyone who isn't 100% *for* aggressive, dog-eat-dog cynical grabbing is now in grave danger of being tagged . . . I fully expect as bitter a period of rabid witch-hunting and persecution as this country has ever seen.

Even those who do believe, simply or simplistically, that the underlying struggle *is* basically between the haves and the have nots must join in applauding Tom's prophetic estimate of the situation. We can more happily join Tony in applauding what he describes as Alger's second successful career—the forty fruitful years of unembittered loving and giving before his death at ninety-one.

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About to Burst Free

by Geoffrey Fox

James D. Cockcroft, *Mexico's Hope: An Encounter with Politics and History* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 320 pp., $18, paperback.

At the outset of this closely argued history of Mexican capitalism, James Cockcroft asks, "How long will the majority of Mexicans put up with being exploited on both sides of the Mexican-U.S. border?"

His answer is, not much longer. The country is "in a state of semi-insurrection. The Mexican state is in full crisis. Large chunks of the nation are occupied by its security forces, which have direct ties with U.S. security forces. Mexico's economy is being held hostage by the United States and the foreign investment and banking communities. Lurking in the shadowy wings are powerful military forces, domestic and foreign. And still Mexicans hope" (372). The stunning defeat of the governing party in the elections of July 2000, unforeseeable when Cockcroft wrote these lines, nevertheless confirms his main contention: the old system, stable for so many decades, cannot endure unchanged.

Mexico's hope is that previously excluded groups will be able to demand and receive greater social justice. How the existing system came to be and why it is being challenged is the story of this book.

Cockcroft focuses on structural changes rather than the more dramatic, and more ephemeral, political events that are the stuff of conventional histories. Thus his chapter on the prehistory of Mexican capitalism barely mentions Hernán Cortés and the conquest of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán (modern Mexico

Geoffrey Fox is the author, most recently, of *Hispanic Nation: Culture, Politics, and the Constructing of Identity*. He lives in New York and can be reached at gefox@post.harvard.edu or <http://gefox.home.mindspring.com/kinesis>.

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City) in 1521. It concentrates instead on indigenous traditions of forced labor and enslavement and the ways in which the Spanish conquerors used them, along with their own institutions and military might, to subject the conquered people to superexploitation. This means forcing them to work for less than they and their families needed to reproduce their own labor power, so that they had to scratch nutrients from the soil to supplement starvation wages—a practice that has been revived today in Mexico's depressed rural areas (12). The colonial economy, based on pillage of existing resources rather than investment in new, and prevented by Spanish law from entering the most lucrative markets even for this booty, scarcely developed in the first 250 years. Only in the late eighteenth century, when Spain gave up its attempts to seal off its colonies completely from British, French, Dutch, and (after 1776) U.S. traders and pirates, did elements of modern capitalism emerge.

Cockcroft presents the 1770-1880 period as "a continuous economic process having three disruptive political moments:" the independence wars of 1810-1822, the U.S.-Mexican war of 1846-1848, and the 1854-1867 civil war and war against French intervention (43). Without sacrificing any of the drama of these events, Cockcroft's approach makes them intelligible by showing how they were caused by, and contributed to, more fundamental developments in Mexican capitalism.

One of these was the timorous rise of a *criollo* (native-born) commercial and industrial bourgeoisie, too weak to pursue independent policies but reliant instead on the state and more powerful foreign bourgeoisies to protect it. The truly wealthy landowners, or *hacendados*, meanwhile, were also becoming more bourgeois, as they discovered the greater bottom-line efficiency of "free" labor (which they could fire) over slaves or forced labor and became more savvy about marketing their agrarian products. Also in this period was an expansion of the "intermediate classes"—e.g., small tradesmen and merchants, intellectuals and professionals—between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In politics, then as now, they would side first with one, then with the other "major pole of a bipolar class contradiction, . . . almost

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always dividing among themselves" (51).

It was the ranks of the poorest and most numerous Mexicans, peasants and hired laborers, that fed the revolt against the Spanish Crown that broke out in 1810. Cockcroft interprets independence in 1822 as "a kind of counter-revolution sponsored by the *criollo* elites" to stem the popular revolt.

As Cockcroft points out, a similar fear of the masses, and of the Crown's inability or unwillingness to control them, drove *criollo* independence movements throughout the Spanish colonies in this period. However, the outcome in Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador, for example, was vastly different. There the counter-revolution failed; the black, Indian, and poor white fighters became increasingly more radical and eventually swept away the *criollo* elites and their values. Why Mexico was different is not explored in this book, but would be an important topic for a comparative history. It may help explain the glaring differences between the political cultures of these countries and that of Mexico, where a president with the anti-elitist, mocking and selfmocking style of a Chávez (Venezuela) or a Bucaram (former president of Ecuador) has been unimaginable—or at least it was until the folksy Vicente Fox Quesada's election last July.

In Mexico, the elites even established a short-lived monarchy, although its rule was very tenuous. And when, a generation later, the "Yankees" invaded in the Mexican-American War, the elites were more concerned with suppressing their own rebellious masses than with fighting the invaders, and clung to power even despite that massive defeat (66).

> The modern state as a national entity constitutionally enshrined above the interests of traditional corporations or privileged oligarchies . . . and supposedly oriented towards the 'public good' rather than toward any special-interest group (or class) was ideologically conceived and juridically consolidated . . .

during and shortly after the war against the French military occupation (1862-1867), writes Cockcroft (79). More specifically, he sees in Benito Juárez's "state-expropriation policy . . . against the Church and uncooperative bourgeois property holders . . . the forerunner of the strong state interventionism of President Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s."

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This is a stretch. Strong state interventionism was all the rage in the 1930s, and if Cárdenas needed an example, he was probably looking to his contemporaries Getulio Vargas, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, or Juárez's namesake, Benito Mussolini, to name just a few. Not everything in a country's history needs to be explained by its prior history.

But back to the 1870s: the modern state, as governed by war hero Porfirio Díaz from 1876 to 1911, guaranteed sufficient stability to permit the growth of railroads and other industries, financed mainly by U.S. and other foreign capital. Along with these industries, the industrial proletariat was growing and organizing, mounting ever more threatening protests against the foreign interests and their *criollo* allies. Here Cockcroft highlights the organizing activities of the Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM), a radical proletarian movement whose history he has earlier written in his classic monograph, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1913*. The militancy of miners, railroad, and other workers encouraged *campesinos*, dissatisfied sectors of the bourgeoisie, and the ever-wavering "intermediate classes" to join what began as a political movement against Díaz in 1910 and grew into the ten-year civil war known as the Mexican Revolution.

Sadly for groups like the PLM, the results were "a defeated peasantry; a crippled labor movement dependent on state favors; a wounded, divided, but victorious set of elites led by industrialists, *hacendados*, and enterprising entrepreneurs [sic] and regional *caudillos;* and a paper triumph, the 1917 Constitution, a very progressive document for its time" (82).

The point is important enough to repeat: "In terms of the key interests of peasants and workers, the Revolution did not succeed; nor was it aborted or 'interrupted.' It was *defeated.*" (108)

This is a harsh and polemical judgment, but if we take the key interests to be the aspirations of groups like the PLM and leaders such as Emiliano Zapata, it is undeniably valid, despite the rhetorical claims of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) to be continuing the Revolution. But, as Cockcroft adds, it was not a final defeat. The urban and rural proletariat "lost a battle, but the war continued, here peacefully,

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there violently, in the decades ahead."

A major reason for their defeat, in Cockcroft's view, was that in 1915 the peasants and workers split: the fifty-thousand-strong Casa del Obrero Mundial accepting inducements from General Alvaro Obregón to abandon its alliance with campesinos and help him defeat the armies of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Dividing working people's organizations has been a persistent strategy of the Mexican state ever since.

After Obregón (assassinated in 1928) came the stridently anticlerical General Plutarco Elías Calles, and after Calles, yet another general, Lázaro Cárdenas (president from 1934-1940), whom Calles hoped to control. Cárdenas' legacy is complex. He outmaneuvered Calles by creating his own base of support in worker and peasant federations and by so doing won the adoration of the masses. He also preserved Mexico's version of capitalism, and kept his mass organizations from becoming powerful enough to demand greater reforms by insisting, like Obregón before him, that the peasant and workers confederations remain separate. He created yet another federation for those most dangerous intellectual workers, the schoolteachers.

After Cárdenas, a series of more cautious and less imaginative (and in many cases, more corrupt) Mexican presidents continued to use these institutions to mete out privileges and wealth to a select few—including the hierarchies of the peasant and labor confederations—and to maintain themselves in power. Their fear and contempt toward those they were supposed to represent became painfully clear in 1968, when the army opened fire on a demonstration of students and other civilians in Tlatelolco Square in Mexico City. There have followed several other badly handled crises, including the 1985 earthquake and then, in the wake of the official enthusiasm for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its supposed benefits in the 1990s, the drastic devaluation of the currency which devastated the whole economy. In all of these, the top-heavy, self-absorbed institutions have failed to respond effectively to the demands of their own members and still less to other constituencies. In the neighborhoods and local branches of the organizations, their

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representatives are the political bosses, *caciques* whose main function is to keep the masses demobilized. But with the economic crisis, the *caciques* have fewer rewards to offer and must rely increasingly, and with decreasing effect, on repression to ward off challenges to their authority.

The challenges are coming from newly mobilized constituencies within the society and from outside. The main challengers internally include Indians—most dramatically, those in the Zapatista National Liberation Army in Chiapas, but also other groups throughout the country—and women. Rural Indians, dependent on wages as farmhands, have been repeasantized by superexploitation in Mexico's most recent and continuing economic crisis, and driven to protest this and other grievances. Women have repeatedly taken the lead in social protests, from the popular risings or *tumultos* of the colony, through the miners' strikes early in the twentieth century, to the mass mobilization of Purépecha indigenous women in defense of their environment in the early 1980s. Physical and economic abuses in the maquiladoras and other low-wage jobs and the increasing difficulties of defending their families in Mexico's present economic crisis are keeping them, and the Indians, "in the forefront of all Mexico's social movements for political and economic change" (382).

Other challenges come from the larger world beyond Mexico. These include information technology (which tends to accelerate mobilization of the most diverse groups, facilitates global coalitions of "indigenous" peoples or of environmentalists, and undermines attempts at official control of information); the internationalization of the Mexican population, with an increasingly large percentage living in the United States (and exposed to different ideas and economic expectations); NAFTA, and pressure from various U.S. groups (including trade unions) to improve environmental conditions, labor conditions, and security of the press.

Cockcroft believes that the two-centuries-old system, in which a strong central state balances the demands of competing elites at the expense of all other sectors, has broken down so completely that it cannot be put together again—at least, not in the same way and not with all the same elements. Whatever new

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system emerges will inevitably have broader participation from wider social sectors and will be forced to address their demands. This is why Mexico has grounds for hope, a hope which has now been deposited in President-elect Vicente Fox Quesada.

This social history is an impressive literary as well as scholarly work. James Cockcroft, author of many important books on Mexico and Latin America, has managed here to organize complex and seemingly unconnected events stretching over six centuries into an especially compelling narrative of the still unresolved struggle for control of the country's wealth and destiny.

Excerpted Statement from Nine Prisoners, from <www.phillyimc.org> (8/11/00)

We are among the over three hundred people now beginning our second week of incarceration for our participation in nonviolent protests at the Republican National Convention, [which were] intended to raise awareness of the abuse of the criminal justice system.

The Philadelphia police did not brutalize us in front of the cameras and have as a consequence been praised for their professionalism. Out of view, the brutality began at once. People in handcuffs were peppersprayed. Others were hogtied with plastic cuffs that cut off their circulation. Men were dragged and kicked in the genitals until they bled. . . . Bruised and bloody, the city of Philadelphia has little choice but to level absurd charges at us and request outrageous bails to keep us off the streets long enough for our most visible wounds to heal. . . . If half of the charges leveled against us were true, Philadelphia's Center City would be a smoldering ruins. . . .

Our bails, ranging from ten thousand to one million dollars for the misdemeanors, far exceed anything ever demanded for similar charges. . . .

In prison, every effort has been made to cut us off from the outside world, from each other, and from the general population. We are confined to two-person cells twenty-three hours a day. Our phones do not work and we have been denied visitors. In spite of this, we have been able to learn something of the unconscionable conditions of other prisoners. Many prisoners here have been awaiting trial for two or more years. Medical emergencies routinely go unattended for weeks or even months. The food is frequently unfit for human consumption. Pods are overcrowded, with makeshift cells serving for six men at a time. Prisoners are beaten by guards. . . . Phones are commonly out of order, making contact with families and lawyers impossible. . . . We have undoubtedly been shielded from the worst conditions of the prison but we have seen enough. . . .

The treatment we have received and the conditions we have been made aware of are inconsistent with a democratic or civil society. . . .We call on all people of good conscience to call Philadelphia officials to demand our release and to demand an end to the barbaric conditions in Philadelphia's jails and prisons.

—Professor, Max, Agent Italia, Tennessee, Wisp, Harry, JD

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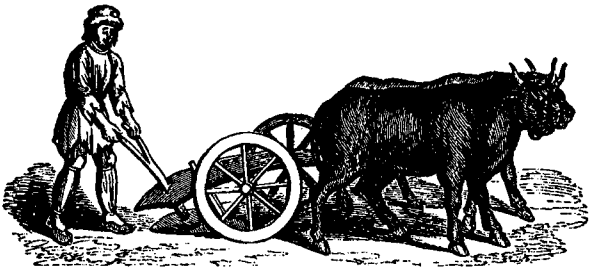

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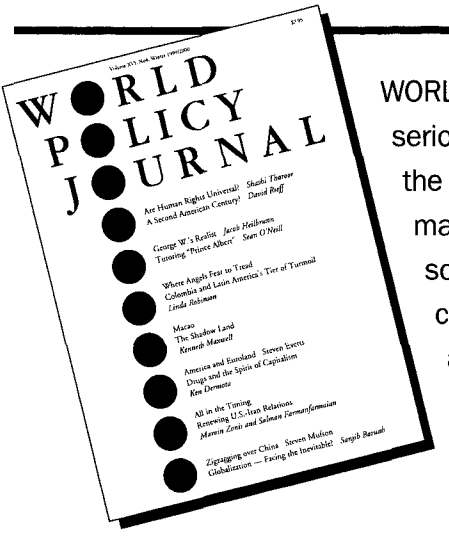
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nation-states are used in the ecological planning of some European states and are being extended in collaboration with the World Resources Institute to more global levels of analysis.

Why would such an important, well-established ecological research institute be so interested in *Marx's Ecology*? The answer lies in the fact that the Department of Ecology, IFF-Vienna, is headed by Marina Fischer-Kowalski, daughter of the great Austrian Marxist Ernst Fischer (author of MR Press title *How to Read Karl Marx*), and herself one of the world's most renowned environmental sociologists. Fischer-Kowalski's theoretical work on physical flows and their significance for ecological analysis is rooted in the concept of socio-ecological metabolism. As she and her talented team of interdisciplinary researchers point out in their writings, the pioneer of this type of outlook, now so important in addressing environmental problems, was Karl Marx. Indeed, more and more researchers on the environment are coming to the realization that a holistic, materialist approach that covers both human history and the environment is necessary if ecological issues are realistically to be addressed, and that Marx in the nineteenth century posed many of the essential questions in this respect. Does all of this surprise us? Maybe a bit. But not as much as it must surprise those who were all too quick to write off Marxism in the ecological realm.

~

In the April 2000 *MR*, Paul Sweezy's article "Cars and Cities" was incorrectly referred to as having been published originally in the April 1972 *MR*. It actually appeared in the April 1973 *MR*. We would like to thank our friend Sham M. Joshi in India for noticing this.

~

The life of Oliver Schule Loud, who died on November 6, 1999, was celebrated at Antioch University Seattle on June 11, 2000. Loud was a distinguished teacher of science as part of a general education. This is part of the message we sent for the memorial gathering:

> Ollie Loud was a much-valued friend. He was especially important to the founders and editors of MR from its very inception. An outstanding clarifier of science and its relation to society, he encouraged and helped us in our attempt to do likewise on complex issues of economics and politics.

~

We are pleased to announce that Sol Dollinger will be reading from and signing copies of his new MR Press book, *Not Automatic*, at Black Oak Books, 1491 Shattuck Ave. in Berkeley, CA, on Monday, September 18 at 7:30pm. For more information, call Black Oak at (510) 486-0698. To order the book, which Studs Terkel called "deeply moving and inspiring," call MR Press at (800) 670-9499.

MONTHLY REVIEW (ISSN 0027 0520) is a publication of Monthly Review Foundation, a non-profit organization. It is published monthly except July and August, when bimonthly, and copyright ©2000, by Monthly Review. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send all address changes (Form 3579) to Monthly Review Foundation, 122 West 27 Street, New York, NY 10001. EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS: 122 West 27 Street, New York, NY 10001. Telephone: (212) 691-2555. Fax: (212) 727-3676. Email: editorial: mrmag@monthlyreview.org; circulation and subscriptions: mrsub@monthlyreview.org. Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. MR is indexed in the PAIS Bulletin, Historical Abstracts, America: History and Life, Political Science Abstracts, and the Alternative Press Index, P.O.Box 33109, Baltimore, MD 21218, tel.: (410) 243-2471. NEWSSTAND DISTRIBUTION: B. DeBoer, Inc., 113 E. Centre Street, Nutley, NJ 07110; Armadillo & Co., 5795 Washington Blvd., Culver City, CA 90232; Small Changes, 3443 Twelfth Avenue West, Seattle, WA 98119; Central Books, 99 Wallis Road, London E9 5LN, England. SUBSCRIPTION PRICES: U.S. one-year $29, students and senior citizens $24; Canadian $40 (Can. dollars); UK £25; other foreign $37 (USD), students and senior citizens $28 (USD). Libraries and Institutions: U.S. $48; Foreign $55 (USD). Additional postage: First Class (U.S. $20); Airmail: Foreign (inc. Canada) $35 (USD).

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(continued from inside front cover)

that the poverty rate of fulltime, year-round workers has shown no improvement since the early 1970s is no cause for wonder. After all, real wages for most workers have also shown no improvement over the same period, while the gap in both income and wealth between the top and the bottom of society has been rapidly increasing. Meanwhile, welfare supports for the poorer segments of society have been removed. If this is a period of prosperity, it is certainly not one of shared prosperity. Furthermore, despite the unusually long economic expansion, the economy remains in many ways sluggish at present when compared to other booms since the Second World War. As the Conference Board itself acknowledges, one can compare the 1990s "tortoise" to the 1960s "hare." The degree of prosperity and economic dynamism associated with the celebrated "New Economy" is thus widely exaggerated in prevailing accounts.

The Conference Board naturally avoids connecting its empirical results to failures of the system. Instead, it seeks an answer to the seeming enigma these empirical results raise by focusing on the increase in the share of low-skill employment in the economy which, it notes, has risen dramatically over the last two decades. This is not seen as connected to what Harry Braverman in *Labor and Monopoly Capital* called "the degradation of work in the twentieth century," but rather as a minor aberration of the New Economy and a failing of the working poor. Marginal workers not fit for work in the Internet age, the Conference Board report argues, are now finding employment and their lack of skill is resulting in below-poverty level wages. The final conclusion of the report strikes an optimistic note. It anticipates that as these workers pick up the necessary skills for the New Economy—something that will presumably occur naturally as society adjusts to the new technological age—this tendency toward an increase in the share of poverty wages will automatically recede.

Does this reasoning seem sound to us? Not at all. The increase of low-paying jobs is not due to the low productivity of workers. Rather, an important part of the current economic growth is in enterprises (in areas such as retail trade) that grow and profit on the backs of workers by means of low-paying jobs (which, of course, are not always fulltime, year-round jobs). The complaint about lack of skills among low-paid workers is thus sheer baloney. The innate ability to do skilled work exists among such workers if the skilled jobs and the training were there. What the Conference Board fails to recognize is that the accumulation process under capitalism is rooted in exploitation, and that all the phenomena that it discusses derive from this simple fact. If they are truly serious in their search for an answer as to why a rising economic tide does not lift all boats, the Conference Board economists ought to set aside their orthodox economic texts and begin studying Marx's *Capital.*

In May, John Foster traveled to Austria, where he was the guest of the Department of Social Ecology of the IFF (Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies of Austrian Universities)-Vienna, Seidengasse 13, A-1070 Vienna <http://www.univie.ac.at/iffsocec>. John had been asked to present a number of lectures based on his new book, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000). The Department of Social Ecology of the IFF-Vienna is a renowned research organization, which has gained a reputation as one of the leading centers of physical flow analysis (the analysis of the flow of material throughput of resources and energy) in modern economies and the use of these in ecological analysis. Its statistical studies of physical flows in different

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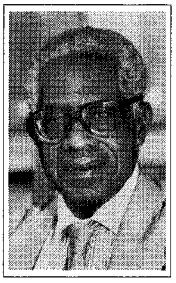

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